

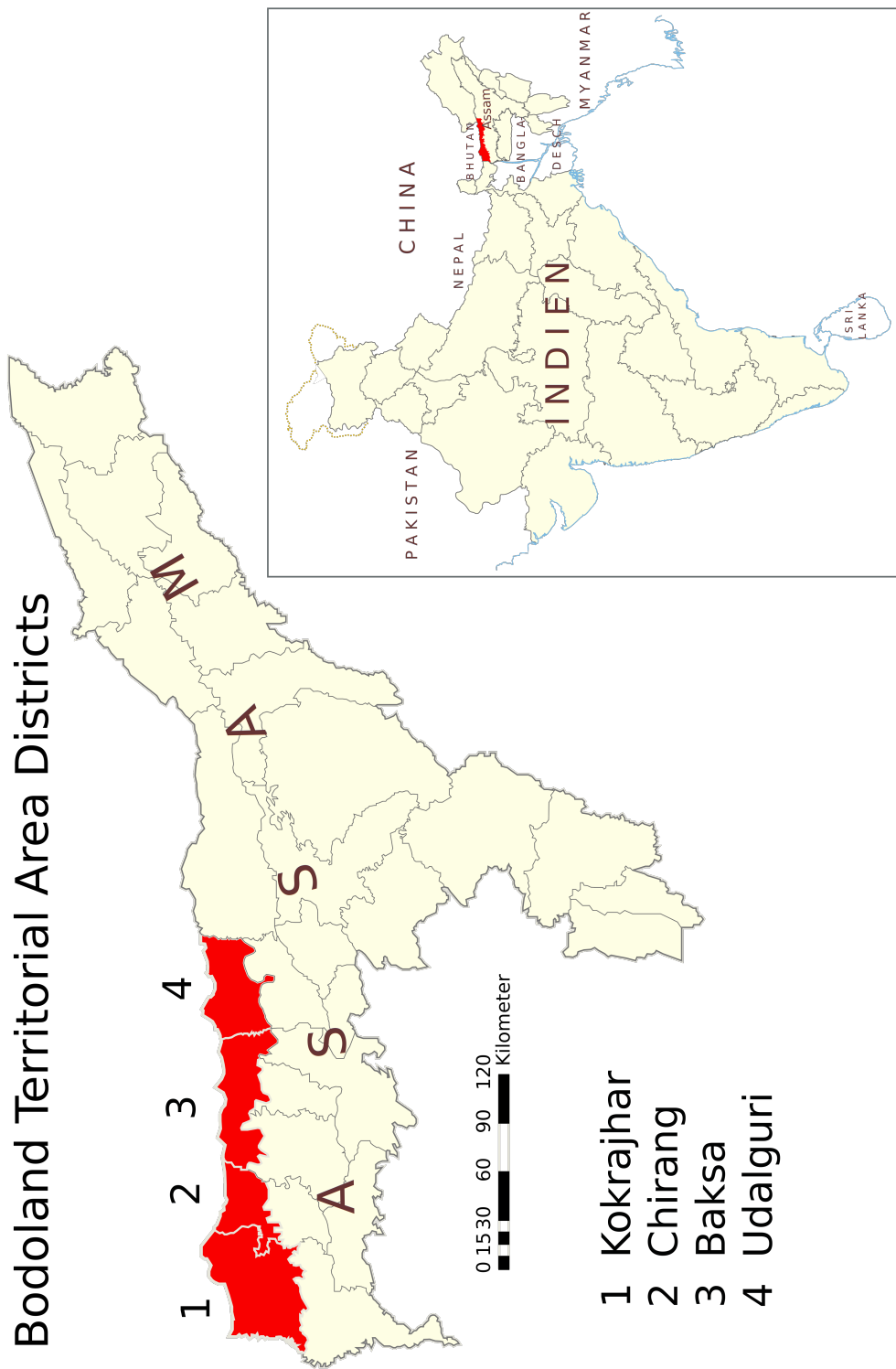
No Way Out of the Woods

Political Ecology of Extraction, Livelihoods and Conservation in Assam

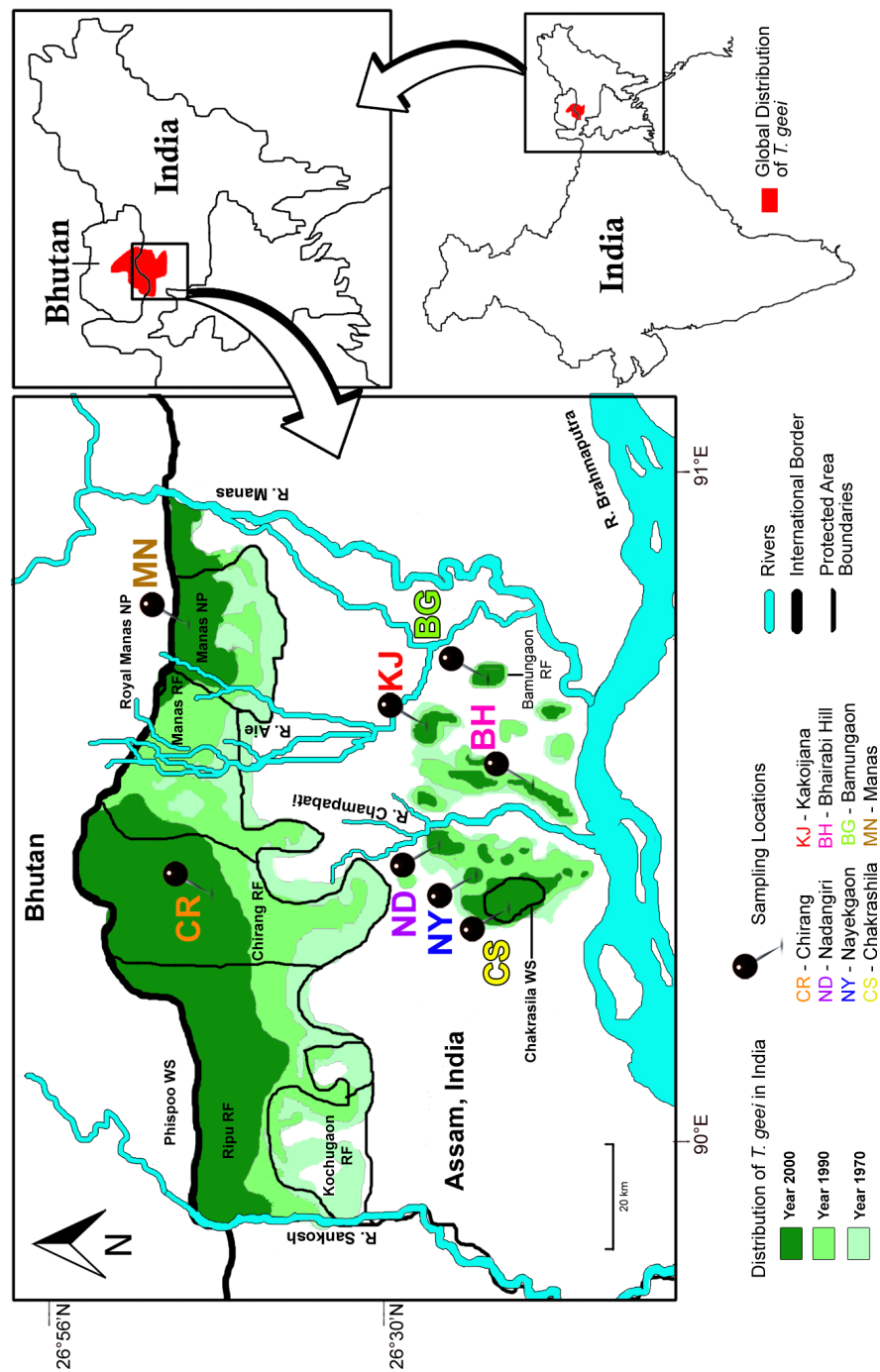
Anwasha Dutta

Dissertation presented in fulfillment of the requirements for a Ph.D. degree in Political and Social Sciences, Option Political Sciences

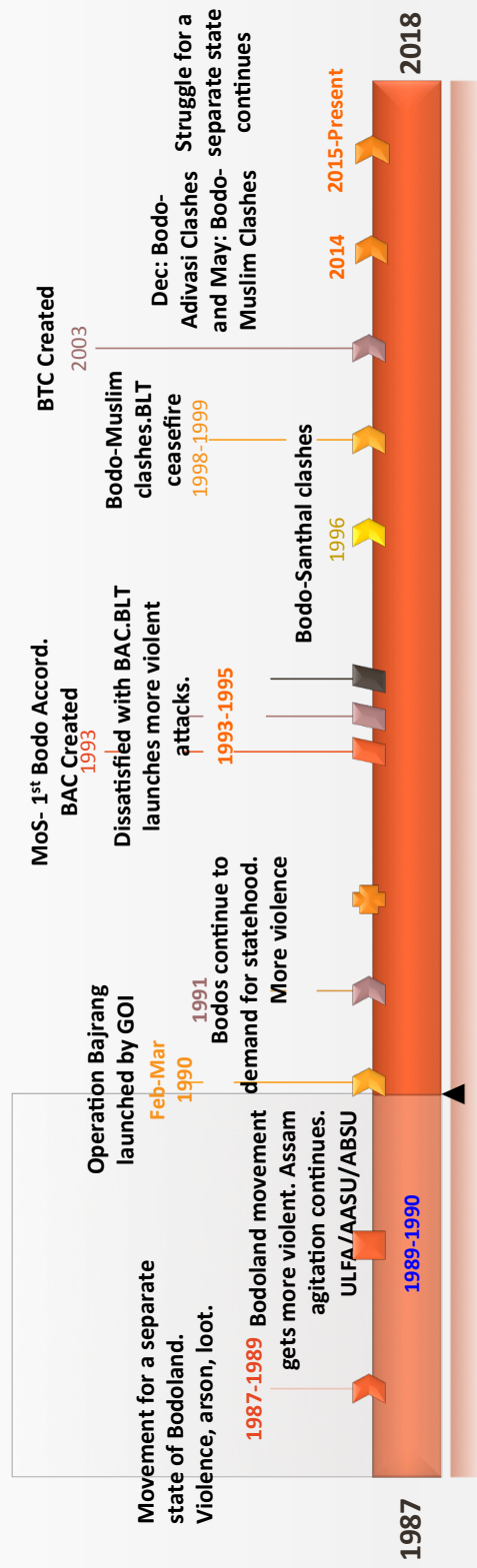
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I Want to be Killed by an Indian Bullet

I heard the news long ago that they were looking for me; in the morning in the afternoon at night. My children told me; my wife told me.

One morning they entered my drawing room, the five of them. Fire, water, air, earth, sky — are the names of these five. They can create men; also destroy men at whim.

They do whatever they fancy. The very avatar of might.

I ask them: “When will you kill me?”

The leader replied: “Now. We’ll kill you right now. Today is very auspicious. Say your prayers. Have you bathed? Have you had your meal?”

“Why will you kill me? What is my crime? What evil deed have I done?” I asked them again.

“Are you a poet who pens gobbledygook and drivel? Or do you consider yourself a seer with oracular powers? Or are you a madman?” asked the leader.

“I know that I’m neither of the first two beings. I cannot tell you about the last one. How can I myself tell whether I’m unhinged or not?”

The leader said: “You can be whatever you would like to be. We are not concerned about this or that. We will kill you now. Our mission is to kill men.”

I ask: “In what manner will you kill me? Will you cut me with a knife? Will you shoot me? Will you club me to death?”

“We will shoot you.”

“With which gun will you shoot me then? Made in India, or made in another country?”

“Foreign made. All of them made in Germany, made in Russia, or made in China. We don’t use guns made in India. Let alone good guns, India cannot even make plastic flowers. When asked to make plastic flowers India can only produce toothbrushes.”

I said: “That’s a good thing. Of what use are plastic flowers without any fragrance?”

The leader said: “No one keeps toothbrushes in vases to do up a room. In life a little embellishment has its part.”

“Whatever it may be, if you must shoot me please shoot me with a gun made in India. I don’t want to die from a foreign bullet. You see, I love India very much.”

“That can never be. Your wish cannot be granted. Don’t ever mention Bharat to us.”

Saying this, they left without killing me; as if they didn’t do anything at all. Being fastidious about death I escaped with my life.

Thangjam Ibopishak Singh, 2003.

Translated by Robin S Ngangom.

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Acknowledgement

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat.

‘I don’t much care where -’ said Alice.

‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat.

‘- so long as I get SOMEWHERE,’ Alice added as an explanation.

‘Oh, you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough.’”

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

...through the course of this PhD I lost and found my way, time and again, and this is because I have been extremely fortunate and privileged to not have treaded this arduous path alone! I have so many people to thank, for guiding me, enduring me, motivating me and most importantly being there for me when I needed them the most — friends, family, strangers who became friends and family, colleagues and peers and everyone that I crossed path with during this journey which in fact began six years ago.

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Abstract

The North East region of India historically became prized because of the discovery of tea on the hilly slopes of Assam, leading to its subsequent conquest by the British. The economic advantages of obtaining tea led to wide scale expeditions to the frontier regions, which coupled with immense administrative challenges also promised enormous wealth and fortune. Today the British have left, but tea remains. The region now consisting of eight states has become part of the Indian republic, sandwiched between Bangladesh, China and Myanmar. This is also a region that is extremely ethnically, linguistically and religiously multitudinous, exhibiting a self-governing spirit that has resulted in the emergence of distinct nationalisms and created “imagined communities” marked by innumerable “secessionist” insurgencies. This has made the region highly sensitive with the proliferation of armed insurgent groups, several of which remain active till date.

Assam remains a volatile space within the geography of India. Although the national government continues to initiate talks regarding conflict resolution, emergency laws that deal with this so-called “disturbed” area are still very much in place. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), for instance, was extended in Assam for six months on February 28, 2018. Passed on September 11, 1958, by the Indian Parliament, the AFSPA authorizes the Indian security forces to arrest anyone without a warrant, to search any place that allegedly harbors suspicious elements, and to fire and/or use force (read torture) even to the point of causing death against any person or gathering of persons who are considered to have broken the law in these professed “disturbed” regions. The military is bestowed with legal immunity for any act(s) of extra-judicial killing in these “disturbed” areas. Technically, the AFSPA is in contradiction of Article 21 (the right to life) and Article 22 (protection against arbitrary arrest and detention) of the Constitution of India. Nevertheless this Act has been in operation across seven states of the Indian Northeast, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya, in varying degrees since 1958. In fact, this has resulted in some scholars from the northeast characterizing such laws as a reified expression of the militarism that characterizes the policy of the Indian government towards the region from the foundational years of the Republic of India.

Within the state of Assam, the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) have been a theatre for recurrent contestations on ethnic and religious lines which has resulted in several episodes of violent clashes between the different ethnic groups leading to colossal loss and destruction of lives and property and large-scale internal displacement of populations since the early 1990s. Intriguingly,

it is the Reserved Forests (RF) that emerged as the centrifugal site of conflict and contestation, counter insurgency operations, illegal forms of resource extraction and post-conflict rehabilitation of internally displaced persons, within the BTAD. The Reserved Forests are thus more than just vast stretches of forestland that have an historically important role in shaping the current conflict landscape. With this in mind the PhD dissertation focused on the Chirang-Riphu and Ultapani RF under the Haltugaon forest division in Kokrajhar district as the prime ethnographic site(s) of investigation.

This PhD dissertation using a multi-scaler approach within a remote rural conflict setting indicates that this is an important question to ask, as to how “political forests” emerge simultaneously as geographies of conflict, competition, contestation and co-operation. This is an especially important area of inquiry for analysis in conflict-affected zones, encompassing the intertwining of several state and non-state actors embedded in unequal and evolving forms of power relations and authority structures. To respond to the above, this PhD dissertation is theoretically situated at the interstices of the broader literatures on political ecology of extraction, crisis conservation, livelihoods and violent conflict; intersection of the fields of studies that share similar epistemological and ontological underpinnings. By juxtaposing the theoretical debates along side grounded empirics collected using ethnographic methods over thirteen months of fieldwork, the thesis further underlines the appropriation of RFs as sites of conflict and resettlement and also contribute to the overall debate around ‘violent environment’ by applying it to a peripheral and sensitive space like that of the RF in which the politics of conservation and management of forest itself is embedded in a larger context of violent conflict. The thesis in the various chapters focuses on issues of (il)legal forms of extraction, encroachment and conservation by armed forces, encompassing there-in the numerous state and non-state actors and authority structures embedded in these process. This is done keeping in mind the on-going low-intensity violent conflict which continues in the backdrop. This aids in advancing and strengthening the conceptual debates in political ecology dealing with conservation, counter-insurgency and violent conflict, through the addition of novel empirical insights.

After providing a blueprint of the RF as a space encompassing within it the issues of violent conflict, extraction, conservation, encroachment and the numerous state and non-state actors who are embedded in these processes; the thesis subsequently transitions to the notions of everyday that operate within these conflict contexts. This is done by narrowing down to the way communities most affected by violent conflict make sense and live through it, while engaging in the extractive economy and *dokhol* or encroachment practices. This tendency to conceptualize the northeast of India as a perpetual localization of the state of exception, especially when filtered through the Agambenian lens over the past two decades in northeast Indian studies is but a reductive approach. This has resulted in deficient attention to the quotidian, the mundane and the ordinary, which seems

to disappear in this exclusive focus on the realms of the symbolic and the spectacular choreographies of violence and death. This impelled me within the scope of this thesis to pay closer attention to the distinctly ordinary ways through which populations survive and endure states of dispossession and abandonment. In the more particular context of the RF in the BTAD, this sustained emphasis on the uneventful as the locus of survival expressed in myriad forms as seen in spheres of livelihood practices, moving deeper into the forest, building of temporary settlements, enduring evictions and COIN operations, is illustrative of the ways in which the local populations engage with the quotidian.

Finally, this thesis extends the call towards a closer and infinitesimal examination of the *political* in political ecology and *society* in nature-society relationships in conservation areas like the BTAD and beyond. Especially since such areas are typically identified as spaces where a wide array of different types of violence unfolds —physical, structural, symbolic, epistemic, slow, and green violence. In hindsight, a recalibrated sense of the political and the social can potentially emerge both from attention to the aleatory and the capricious in the realm of everyday life and forms of being.

Nederlandstalige Samenvatting

Historisch was de noordoostelijke regio van India gegeerd door van de ontdekking van thee op de hellingen van Assam, die leidde tot de daaropvolgende verovering door de Britten. De economische winsten verbonden met thee leidden tot grootschalige expedities naar de grensregio's die, ondanks de immense administratieve uitdagingen, ook enorme rijkdom en fortuin beloofden. Vandaag zijn de Britten vertrokken, maar thee is gebleven. De regio die nu uit acht deelstaten bestaat, is onderdeel geworden van de Indiase republiek, ingeklemd tussen Bangladesh, China en Myanmar. Het is ook een regio die uitermate etnisch, taalkundig en religieus verscheiden is, en een zelfbesturend esprit vertoont. Dit heeft geresulteerd in de opkomst van verschillende vormen van nationalisme en 'imagined communities' die bovendien worden gekenmerkt door ontelbare 'secessionistische' opstanden. Dit heeft de regio zeer gevoelig gemaakt met de het ontstaan en de verspreiding van gewapende groepen, waarvan er verschillende actief blijven tot op de dag van vandaag. Assam blijft een volatiele ruimte binnen de geografie van India. Hoewel de centrale regering gesprekken blijft voeren met betrekking tot conflictresolutie, zijn er nog steeds veel wetten actief die betrekking hebben op dit zogenaamde "verstoorde" gebied. De Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) werd bijvoorbeeld op 28 februari 2018 in Assam voor zes maanden verlengd. AFSPA, op 11 september 1958 gestemd door het Indiase Parlement, laat de Indiase veiligheidstroepen toe om iemand te arresteren zonder arrestatiebevel, elke plaats te onderzoeken die naar verluidt verdachte elementen herbergt, en om te schieten en / of geweld te gebruiken (lees marteling) zelfs tot op het punt de dood te veroorzaken tegen een persoon of bijeenkomst van personen waarvan wordt aangenomen dat ze de wet overtreden hebben in deze zogenaamde "verstoorde" regio's. Het leger krijgt juridische immuniteit voor elke vorm van extra-juridische doding in deze "verstoorde" gebieden. Technisch gezien is AFSPA in tegenspraak met artikel 21 (het recht op leven) en artikel 22 (bescherming tegen willekeurige arrestatie en detentie) van de Indiase grondwet. Desalniettemin is deze wet in werking in zeven staten van het Indiase noordoosten, namelijk: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura en Meghalaya, in verschillende mate sinds 1958. Dit heeft een aantal onderzoekers uit het noordoosten ertoe genoopt om zulke wetten te typeren als de geconcretiseerde uitdrukking van het militarisme dat kenmerkend is voor het beleid van de Indiase regering ten opzichte van de regio en dit vanaf de vroege jaren van de Republiek India. Binnen de staat Assam zijn de Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) het theater geweest voor steeds herhaalde contestatie rond etnische en religieuze breuklijnen die hebben geresulteerd in verschillende episodes van geweld tussen de

verschillende etnische groepen en die een verregaand menselijke tol geëist hebben alsook geleid hebben tot het verlies van eigendommen en grootschalige interne ontheemding sinds het begin van de jaren negentig. Het is intrigerend dat binnen de BTAD de Reserved Forests (RF) de centrale plaats zijn gaan innemen niet alleen in conflict en contestatie, maar ook in counter-insurgency operaties, illegale vormen van ontginning van natuurlijke rijkdommen en in de post-conflict rehabilitatie van intern ontheemden,. De RF zijn dus meer dan alleen uitgestrekte bosgebieden die een historisch belangrijke rol spelen in het vormgeven van het huidige conflictlandschap. Met dit in gedachten richtte dit proefschrift zich op de Chirang-Ripha en Ultapani RF onder de bosafdeling van Haltugaoon in het district Kokrajhar als de voornaamste etnografische onderzoekslocatie(s). Dit proefschrift, gebruik makend van een multi-scalaire benadering in de analyse van een afgelegen conflictsetting op het platteland, wil het belang aantonen van de vraag hoe 'politieke bossen' zich tegelijkertijd laten begrijpen als geografieën van conflict, competitie, betwisting én samenwerking. Dit is een bijzonder belangrijk onderzoeksgebied voor de analyse van door conflicten getroffen gebieden, waaronder de verstrengeling van verschillende staats- en niet-statelijke actoren ingebed is in ongelijke en steeds veranderende machtsverhoudingen en gezagsstructuren. Om te antwoorden op de bovenstaande vraag is dit proefschrift theoretisch gelegen op de intersectie van de bredere literatuur over politieke ecologie van ontginning, natuurbeheer in crisissituaties, levensonderhoud en gewelddadige conflicten; de kruising van studiegebieden met vergelijkbare epistemologische en ontologische onderbouwing. Door de theoretische debatten in contact te brengen en in contrast te stellen met diepgaand empirisch materiaal, verzameld met behulp van etnografische methoden gedurende dertien maanden veldwerk, onderstreept het proefschrift verder de centrale plaats van RF's als locaties van conflicten en hervestiging en draagt ook bij aan het algemene debat rond 'violent environments' door dit toe te passen op een perifere en sensitieve ruimte zoals die van de RF waarin de politiek van conservatie en beheer van bossen zelf is ingebed in een bredere context van gewelddadig conflict. Het proefschrift concentreert zich in de verschillende hoofdstukken op kwesties zoals (il) legale vormen van winning, encroachment en natuurbeheer door strijdkrachten, hierdoor ook de talrijke staats- en niet-statelijke actoren en gezagsstructuren ingebed in deze processen te integreren. Hierbij wordt steeds rekening gehouden met het aan de gang zijnde gewelddadige conflict van lage intensiteit dat op de achtergrond voortduurt. Hierdoor worden aan aantal debaten binnen de politieke ecologie ondersteund en versterkt, in het bijzonder deze die te maken hebben met natuurbehoud, counter-insurgency en gewelddadige conflicten, door de toevoeging van nieuwe empirische inzichten. Na het aantonen dat de RF als het ware een blauwdruk vormen van een ruimte in zichzelf de problematieken van gewelddadig conflict, winning, conservatie, encroachment en vele staats- en niet-statelijke actoren die ingebed zijn in deze processen draagt, gaat het proefschrift vervolgens over naar het exploreren van noties van het alledaagse die

binnen deze conflictcontexten opereren. Dit wordt gedaan door te focussen op de manier waarop gemeenschappen die het zwaarst door gewelddadige conflicten zijn getroffen, deze doorleven en tegelijkertijd deelnemen aan de extractieve economie en aan praktijken van *dokhol*- of encroachment. De tendens om het noordoosten van India te conceptualiseren als een eeuwigdurende locatie waarin de uitzonderingstoestand gegreond is, zeker wanneer bovendien gefilterd door de Agambeniaanse lens die in de afgelopen twee decennia in Noordoost-Indiase studies populair was, is slechts reductief. Deze aanpak heeft bovendien geresulteerd in een ondermaatse aandacht voor het alledaagse en gewone, dat lijkt te verdwijnen door een vaak deze exclusieve focus op de symbolische en de spectaculaire choreografieën van geweld en dood. Dit dreef mij ertoe om binnen het kader van dit proefschrift meer aandacht te schenken aan de duidelijk gewone manieren waarop populaties overleven en een toestand van onteigening en verlatenheid doorstaan. In de meer specifieke context van de RF in de BTAD, deze aanhoudende nadruk op het onspectaculaire als de locus van overleven, zoals uitgedrukt in ontelbare vormen zoals gezien in praktijken van levensonderhoud, het dieper in het bos trekken, het bouwen van tijdelijke nederzettingen, niet-aflatende uitzettingen en COIN operaties, is illustratief voor de manier waarop de lokale bevolking met het dagdagelijkse omgaat.

Ten slotte wil dit proefschrift de oproep uitdragen voor een minutieus onderzoek van het *politieke* in de politieke ecologie en *samenleving* in de relatie natuur-samenleven de in beschermde gebieden zoals de BTAD en daarbuiten; Vooral omdat dergelijke gebieden kunnen worden geïdentificeerd als ruimtes waarin een breed scala van verschillende soorten geweld zich ontvouwt - fysiek, structureel, symbolisch, epistemisch, langzaam en *groen* geweld. Uit dit proces kan een gerekalibreerd aanvoelen voor het politieke en sociale ontstaan, zowel vanuit de aandacht voor het aleatorische en het wispelturige binnen het dagelijks leven en vormen van zijn.

List of Abbreviations

AASU All Assam Students Union

AASAA All Adivasi Students Association of Assam

AANLA All Adivasi National Liberation Army

ABSU All Bodo Students Union

ABMSU All Bodo Minority Students Union

AFSPA Armed Forces Special Powers Act

AGP Assam Gana Parishad

AIUDF All India United Democratic Front

AKRSU All Koch-Ranjbongshi Students Union

BAC Bodoland Autonomous Council

BJP Bharatiya Janata Party

BLT Bodo Liberation Tigers

BPF Bodoland People's Front

BSF Border Security Force

BSU Bodoland Students Union

BTAD Bodoland Territorial Area Districts

BTC Bodoland Territorial Council

CC Commodity Chain

Cft Cubic Feet

COIN Counter-Insurgency

DFID Department for International Development

DFO District Forest Officer

ETF Ecological Task Force

FD Forest Department

GCC Global Commodity Chain

INC Indian National Congress

KNP Kaziranga National Park

NDFB National Democratic Front of Bodoland

NDFB (S) National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Songbijit)

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

NSCN National Socialist Council of Nagaland

PA Protected Area

PTCA Plains Tribal Council of Assam

RF Reserved Forests

SC Scheduled Caste

SEZ Special Economic Zones

ST Scheduled Tribe

ULFA United Liberation Front of Assam

Glossary

AASU All Assam Students Union. Is a students union in the state of Assam, India that formally adopted its constitution in August 1967.

ABSU All Bodo Students Union. Is a non-political student's organization formed in 1967 in the Bodoland region of Assam, India.

AFSPA Armed Forces Special Powers Act. AFSPA gives the Indian armed forces the power to maintain public order in "disturbed areas". They have the authority to prohibit a gathering of five or more persons in an area, can use force or even open fire after giving due warning if they feel a person is in contravention of the law. If reasonable suspicion exists, the army can also arrest a person without a warrant; enter or search a premises without a warrant; and ban the possession of firearms. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Bill was passed by both the Houses of Parliament and it was approved by the President on September 11, 1958. It became known as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. <https://bit.ly/2Sfgncm>

AGP Assam Gana Parishad. Translated, as Assam People's Party is a political party in the state of Assam in India that was formed in 1985. <http://www.asomganaparishad.in/>

BJP Bharatiya Janata Party. Translated, as Indian People's Party is one of the two major national political parties in India. As of 2018, it is India's largest political party in terms of representation in the national parliament and state assemblies, and it is the world's largest party in terms of primary membership.

BLT Bodo Liberation Tigers. Now surrendered BLT is an armed insurgent group that operated in the Bodo dominated regions of Assam India. The group initially wanted to carve out a separate state of Bodoland but laid down arms with the establishment of Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003.

BPF Bodoland People's Front. The BLT after surrendering transformed itself into a state political party called the BPF. Since 2003 BPF has been in power in the BTAD, with Mr. Hagrama Mohillary as its chief. <https://bit.ly/2D4Eiq0>

BTAD Bodoland Territorial Area Districts. BTAD refers to the area under the jurisdiction of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) in Assam. Created under the sixth schedule of the

Constitution of India, BTAD consists of 4 districts — Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri and Chirang. These districts were carved out of seven existing districts of Assam — Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Nalbari, Barpeta, Kamrup, Sonitpur and Darrang. The current capital of BTAD is Kokrajhar.

BTC Bodoland Territorial Council. On February 10, 2003, the Assam government, the Union government and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) signed the Memorandum of Settlement to form the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The jurisdiction of the BTC extends over 3082 villages and the council has been given legislative powers over 40 subjects. The accord provides for an Executive Council comprising of a maximum of 12 Executive Members, including a Chief and a Deputy Chief, with adequate representation to the non-tribal population.

Chai Tea

Dokhol An Assamese/Bengali word which roughly translates to ‘grab or occupy by force’. In the context of this thesis it was used by my interlocutors in relation to (forest)land.

Hagrama Mohilary An ex-BLT cadre, Mohilary is the chief of BTC and is the chairperson of Bodoland People’s Front which is one of the major political party in BTAD in coalition with the BJP.

Jungle Forest

Jonglee Wild

NDFB National Democratic Front of Bodoland. The NDFB is an armed insurgent group that seeks to obtain a sovereign Bodoland for the Bodo people. The group was led by Ranjan Daimary (RD) till 2009 and then split into two. The new group was called NDFB-P or Progressive and was led by Dhiren Boro. In 2010 Daimary was arrested and NDFB(RD) is currently under ceasefire. NDFB-P is in peace talks with the government. In the meanwhile a cadre by the name Ingti Kathar Songbijit formed the NDFB(S), which continues to remain active till date.

SC Scheduled Caste. The term SC is a legal designation under the Constitution of India. It was adopted in 1935 when the British listed the lowest ranking Hindu castes in a schedule appended to the Government of India Act for the purpose of statutory safeguards and other benefits. Only marginalized Hindu communities can be deemed SC in India according to the Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1950.

ST Scheduled Tribe. STs are classified as marginalized communities under the Indian Constitution due to geographical isolation and not social or economic isolation like the SCs.

ULFA United Liberation Front of Assam. ULFA is a violent extremist organization formed in 1979, in Assam. The goal of ULFA is to establish a sovereign state of Assam by seceding from the Indian federation.

Sundori

Beloved Sundori,¹
Yesterday one of my people
Killed one of your people
And one of your people
Killed one of my people.
Today they have both sworn
To kill on sight.
But this is neither you nor I,
Shall we meet by the Umkhrah River
And empty this madness
Into its angry summer floods?
I send this message
Through a fearful night breeze,
Please leave your window open.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih² in *The Yearning of seeds*, 2011

¹ Literally translates to ‘a beautiful woman’.

² Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih is a modern poet from Shillong, Meghalaya. His rooted yet critical verses uncover the unsaid of *Khasi* society, being a *khasi* himself. Sundori was written during the troubles of 1990s when the local nationalist anger and resentment was at its peak in Meghalaya and other north-eastern states like Manipur, Nagaland and Assam.

The Peace Bird

Let the peace bird fly to me
After the dark smoke of the blast
Let the gentle breezes blow
After the animal brutality of merciless killing
Let innocent smiles bloom on the lips of children
And usher in the new born Sun
To transform a dying generation
Who pretend to wear a steel heart
A heart made of machines.

Dr. Anil Boro³ in *Delphi and other Poems, 2015* (translated from Bodo by the poet)

³ Dr. Anil Boro is a Bodo poet and awarded Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 2013 for “Delphini Onthai Mwdai Arw Gubun Gubun Khonthai”.

1 Introduction

“nijer baap kharaap hoileo ki keu kharap koi?”¹

(If your own father is evil, would you still call him evil?)

1.1 The Personal Shall Always be Political

I wanted to foreground in the introduction to this dissertation what impelled me to work on conflict in northeast India and that story unfortunately is one of brutality and sadness. In fact there are three life events, which remain as a guiding force in this doctoral journey. I grew up in a Assam that was affected by separatist and self-determination movements in the nineties. The first event that caste an indelible impression on my mind is one of the first stories that date back to my childhood. It is a narrative I heard from my mother about an incident concerning my grandparent's neighbors. Every summer I visited my grandparents in the town of Tinsukia in upper Assam, the hub of the United Liberation Front of Assam (henceforth ULFA) in the state. My mother told me this story when I was about ten years old.

My grandparents and these neighbors shared a common wall. My mother narrated, how in the year 1990 the neighbor's nephew went missing. After about a month a gunny bag was found outside their house early in the morning. When they opened the gunny bag, they found the body of their nephew chopped into little pieces.

This is an event I kept re-visiting through various stages in my life. This story is one of the accounts that drove me to explore the nature of violent conflict in northeast India. This also instilled in me the curiosity to fathom how people cope with everyday forms and processes of violent conflict.

The second life event derives from my growing up years in various turbulent districts of Assam, owing to my father's profession. Words like bomb blasts, military, ULFA, curfew, kidnappings and so on informed the quotidian existence of most of us living in northeast India. Narratives and sites of violence sprung up all around me and one of these takes me back to the day I returned from school, when I was studying in the second grade and my grandmother, most evidently disturbed,

¹ Interview with a Muslim women before the Assam Assembly elections in April 2016. She was a resident of a project called the Ajmal model village, run by the Ajmal foundation under the patronage of perfume baron, philanthropist and leader of the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), whose vote bank is primarily composed of Muslim voters.

asked me to get ready. Not wanting to leave me alone in the house, she asked me to accompany her to a neighbor's whose newly wed son had been shot dead by suspected militants for refusing to pay ransom. I remember the sight of his dead-body, his wailing wife and mother and the large presence of police personnel. The atmosphere was imbued with a sense of unnatural death, which would probably take years for the family to reconcile with. I remember the sheer chaos surrounding the incident and also the realization that life had almost become easily dispensable, which even my eight-year-old self could comprehend. This extended to family conversations, which centered on allegiances that even close family, acquaintances and friends owed to the insurgent groups, leading to a general feeling of suspicion and distrust.

From a couple of years later, when I was in fourth grade, I recall this instance when we had an early dinner and had to observe complete darkness for two hours or so as part of a protest call by the ULFA. I remember the whole family huddled together around the flickering light of a candle and the deafening silence all around, solely punctuated by the soldier's boots patrolling the streets.

Ultimately these incidents of bomb blasts, violence and abductions became part of our everyday existence, which did not merit questioning. Subsequently my bachelor's education took me to New Delhi, where I was often asked questions like, "in northeast, do you live on trees?" or "what currency do you use?" and there was absolutely no awareness of the socio-political situation in the northeast. I realized how peripheral this conflict was in/to the national consciousness, which both infuriated and amused me, but also provoked me to bring these stories to a larger audience. What began as a thought finally began to take shape in form of the final life event, when I opted to go to the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) in 2008 for two months, one of the most turbulent regions in India after Kashmir as part of my master's education in Social Work. The tension surrounding the conflict, which I shall speak about later, was palpable and we were constantly asked to exercise great caution by the NGO that hosted us, as we went to interior villages for our fieldwork. Stories about abductions, sighting of corpses and occasional bomb blasts were commonplace coupled with abject poverty and destitution. This also coincided with a spate of serial bomb blasts across Assam, which killed sixty-eight people and injured over three hundred².

At this juncture, as a young social scientist and a social worker in training, I felt extremely troubled by the lack of public awareness, media coverage and academic scholarship on the region. As usual the national media paid scant attention to this occurrence. This is when I arrived at a decision to continue my academic engagement with Assam, focusing on the BTAD. I shall now embed this thesis within the larger debates on the political ecology of resource extraction, conservation and livelihoods and also highlight the general contribution this PhD makes to the field of northeastern

²See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-assam-blast-idUSTRE49T1UW20081031>

studies by focusing on the notion of everyday. I shall return to my reflexive ethnographic approaches navigating the boundaries of the insider-outsider dichotomy in my section on methodology.

1.2 Whose (forest) land is it, anyway?

Contextualizing Conflict — Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) and Northeast India

At the very onset, I ought to mention that this dissertation is not a classical A-to-B work but a collection of five articles, each constituting its corresponding theoretical framing. This introductory chapter should be treated as the meta-layer, which establishes linkages and fits into the broader research traditions that have been dealt with in the respective articles. To analyze this multi-scalar political ecology of extraction, conservation and livelihoods with a special focus on the Reserved Forests (RF), I have divided my PhD dissertation into **three** parts, which are of course interconnected. The **first** part, which consists of one article, introduces the political landscape of Assam and the BTAD by situating it within the complex web of recurring inter-ethnic conflicts that the region is enmeshed in. I also emphasize that in order to get a grasp over the contemporary socio-political landscape of Assam, it is pertinent to look back at its complex pre- and postcolonial history. I situate this within the context of Sanjib Baruah's significant book, *India Against Itself*, where Baruah (2009) argues that the history of conflicts in Assam began with its incorporation into British India and continued after independence in the form of an 'unresolved national question' due to India's formally federal but actually centralized government structure. Moreover, this article also considers the complexities of both relative structural autonomy, for a region within a federated polity like India, and the difficulties of aligning the promise of such autonomy with favorable outcomes for those who have fought for it. In this case, BTAD constituted as a result of recurring violent struggles against the ethnic Assamese, Bengalis, Adivasis, and Muslim immigrants (from Bangladesh) seem to have achieved little for the ordinary Bodo. An emergent Bodo elite though continues to profit economically and politically. Gorkhaland, and even the states of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, are other examples of similar processes in nearby areas to Bodoland within the Indian federation. These everyday forms of struggles and confrontations among the various ethnic groups become apparent in the subsequent articles especially in relation to (forest)land.

Drawing on the above article, the **second** part consists of three further articles and the dissertation is guided by the following research questions, which I arrived at in course of my empirical sojourn, as well as by delving into the existing literature on political ecology, violent environments and conflict studies.

- *How has the Reserved Forest in Assam (particularly in BTAD) emerged as lived geographies*

of violent inter-ethnic conflict, cooperation and competition?

- *How these complex web of inter-ethnic relationships among the three major ethnic groups (as explained in the first article) and actors further operate in the (il)legal extractive economy and within forms of encroachment(s) and/or dokhol?*
- *How conflict and forms of domination, feed into (or not) the conservation- counterinsurgency nexus, eventually encompassing therein the notions of everyday?*

In the subsequent sections, I begin by addressing these questions, which guide the course of this PhD thesis by referring to the relevant academic debates, and also situate the contribution of this thesis within those debates. The **third** part of this dissertation, consisting of the final article, follows from the question(s) above and deals with the notions of the everyday as posited *vis-e-vis* the increasing overemphasis on the spectacle of resistance especially in the context of northeastern studies.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I first draw upon the broader scholarship in the domain of political ecology particularly focusing on aspects of resource extraction and conservation on war footing. Thereafter, I flesh out and link the ‘spatial’ focus, dominant in the above debates more explicitly, by engaging with emerging literature(s) in the field of legal geography. I subsequently tie in the debates surrounding the political ecology of livelihoods with the political economy of livelihoods literature and argue for a more ecological livelihoods perspective within the framework of this PhD. Additionally, in such fragile environments, it is difficult to operationalize livelihoods as separate from the notion of ‘everyday’. By also placing the notion of everyday into the larger field of northeastern studies as it stands now, this PhD eventually emerges as a much-needed intervention since the field has largely been repeating historical or empirical analyses of identity, ethnicity, security and violence. I also argue the reasons as to why this literature does not fully expand our understanding of the dynamics of conflict and extraction in an extremely pluralistic and complex violent socio-political environment, as was observed in the RFs, and arguably, about the complexity of conservation on war-footing imbibed within counter-insurgency efforts in conflict areas more broadly.

Yet, the more specific contribution this thesis makes to these debates is discussed more explicitly in the separate articles and the concluding chapter. My intent here is to carve out the silhouette of such a layered theoretical and analytical framework that embraces the versatility of the reserved forests in time of violent conflict. I conclude this introductory chapter with an outline of the PhD thesis.

1.3 Historicizing the Conflict Context in BTAD

Most studies on state, economy and society in India have focused on structural accumulation: labor, capital, caste (Harris-White 2003); or political economy- the linkages between corruption, state formation, collective action and identity (Eckert 2014; Gooptu 2014; Orjuela 2014). Important to note is that, while this thesis can draw on this literature, most of the above studies have been carried out in relatively stable and peaceful Indian states with some periodic episodes of communal/electoral violence or ‘big man’ ‘muscle power’ politics (Witsoe 2013; Berenschot 2012; Hansen 2001). Moreover the predominant work on violent conflict in the context of India has focused on ethnic, communal and electoral forms of violence mainly in the context of states like Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Delhi, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Punjab among others (see Brass 1997, 2011; Varshney 2003; Wilkinson 2006; Berenschot 2012; Spencer 2007; Staniland 2015). There has also been some phenomenal yet limited (ethnographic) work on the Maoist and/or naxalite violence (see Shah 2010; Ahuja and Ganguly 2007; Suykens 2010). However, most of this scholarship has barely concentrated on the main conflict theaters in the nation, specifically Jammu & Kashmir and the more violent states in the northeast of India. Additionally, for too long now Northeast Indian Studies has been caught within the cul-de-sac of greed and grievance debates. Rebel movements and insurgency have generally been studied from a causal perspective. Studies that go beyond issues of ethnicity and identity, material culture, security and exceptionalism continue to remain ethnographically thin and theoretically limited.

BTAD in the context of northeast India therefore presents a militarized society with ongoing low-intensity ethnic violence including an important illegal extractive economy. Although similar (il)legal extractive economies exist in other north and central Indian states with regard to sand mining as well as logging, here these practices are nestled within a milieu of recurring violent conflict, insurgency, displacement, conservation and counter-insurgency operations. The region consequently offers a vast potential for theoretical and empirical knowledge generation, which has been barely explored in existing scholarly works on northeast and India.

The conflict situation in BTAD has to be situated both geographically and politically within the larger framework of insurgent and self-determination movements more specifically in Assam and the northeastern region of India, in general. The Northeast refers to the wedge of land situated on the far-eastern periphery of India (McDuie-Ra 2009). The Northeastern region consists of eight federal states around the Brahmaputra and Barak river valleys. It is joined to the rest of India, only by a narrow tract of land at Siliguri in West Bengal, commonly referred to as the chicken’s neck. The region shares international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, China (Tibet), and Nepal, and the majority of the population has ethnic and linguistic links to Southeast Asia and the greater Himalayas. The expanse has been governed as an exception to the rule-of-law in India. Although

talk of conflict resolution has been looming large, emergency laws that deal with this disturbed area are still in place. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), for example, was extended in the state of Assam for six months on Feb 28, 2018 (Baisya 2018). The AFSPA is a reworking of the Armed Forces Special Powers Ordinance promulgated by the British in 1942 to suppress the nationalist Quit India Movement—a colonial law that has had an afterlife in post-colonial times (Baisya 2015). Northeastern states like Nagaland and Manipur have been administered under the ambit of such military laws almost continuously since India’s independence, with the likes of Assam, Tripura and Mizoram also facing the brunt of such operations. Akoijam in Baisya (2015) succinctly notes, “AFSPA, rather than being a response to the “armed revolt” in the North East, is...a reified expression of the militarism that characterizes the policy of the Indian government towards the region from the foundational years of the Republic of India.”

Historically, in the colonial era, these hill tracts were administered under special provisions and were classified as excluded or partially excluded areas, restricting access to populates from other parts of India and also creating a differentiated system of rule accompanied by high levels of violence directed at hill communities (Robb 1997). In the post colonial era, as Udayon Misra writes, “mainland India and the Indo-Hindu heartland represented in India’s power structure did not seem much concerned about the region as long as the ‘colorful’ tribes of the northeast were fixed in their exotic locales providing the occasional excitement to the eco-tourist or the anthropological researcher” (Misra 2014:5). Attempts by the Indian nation-state in the years after independence, to almost forcibly integrate the northeast into the Indian mainstream were met with hostility, particularly by the hill areas. What ensued are violent struggles to secede from the Indian federation across several northeastern states, including Assam. As Karlsson (2011) further notes, the entire political map of northeast India is fraught with competing national imageries and contested state boundaries. Heterogeneity is what characterizes the northeast of India through the existence of numerous languages, livelihood practices, ethnicity, religion and politics of ecology. Attempts at shoving all this under a common label can be visualized as erasure of critical distinctions and imposition of mistaken and enforced homogeneity. As it stands, there exists a plethora of occurrences of such simplifications in both media reports and scholarly publications. The Mizo poet Cherry L. Chhange (2011) has neatly summed up this apparent production of us versus them in the following lines:

You look at me, and you see
My eyes, my skin, my language, my faith
You dissect my past, analyze my present
Predict my future and build my profile.
I am curiosity, an ‘ethnic’ specimen.
Politics, history, anthropology, you impressive learning.

All unable to answer the fundamental question —
“What does an Indian look like?”
—An India looks like me, an Indian is Me.

Therefore, a more systematized study of political, economic and social processes in these peripheries of the Indian nation state is not just indispensable for cultivating better insights into the organization of everyday lives in these borderlands but also to comprehend how exactly political processes in the margin “affect the formation and territorialization of states” (Baud and Van Schendel 1997:212). Since this PhD thesis centers on BTAD as the primary geographical focus, I would like to position the BTAD within these margins given its history of discontentment with the Indian state and the movement for a separate state of Bodoland.

Revisiting the conflict context in BTAD and the more recent events that led to the Bodo agitation can be traced back to 1967, when the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and an All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) were set up to fight for better status for the plains tribals. Later the PTCA mitigated its demands; but the ABSU became increasingly committed towards a more radical stand. Simultaneously the anti-foreigner’s movement led by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) was aimed towards more autonomy for the Assamese in order to protect Assam’s natural resources and demographics by keeping out foreign nationals, mainly from Bangladesh, who were exerting severe pressure on local land and resources. The Bodo leadership anticipated that an eventual peace agreement between the Indian government and the AASU would assist the Bodo community to escape from its entrapment (Vandekerckhove and Suykens 2010; Baruah 2003). However, the Assam Accord of 1985 between the Indian state and AASU was far from satisfactory for the latter. Moreover, the AASU, which had now launched a political party called the Ahom Gana Parishad (AGP), appeared hesitant in helping the Bodo case for the creation of a separate state of Bodoland. For the ABSU leaders, this was a clear sign that the time had come to take up arms. In 1987, under the umbrella of the Bodo People’s Action Committee, the ABSU staged huge rallies and demonstrations against Assamese supremacy (George 1994). This was also the time when the movement became violent with the launch of the Border Security Force (BSF), which later changed its name to the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). A failed Bodo accord in 1993 led to further intensification of the violence with the entrance of another rebel group called the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLT) along with the NDFB. Eventually, a tripartite agreement was arrived at amongst the Government of India, the Government of Assam and the BLT that led to the amendment of the Sixth Schedule³ of the Indian Constitution and the creation of the BTAD with

³ The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides for the creation and management of autonomous districts and provinces within the Indian federation. For more information see :

http://www.prsindia.org/uploads/media/Sixth%20Schedule%201/bill164_20080318164_SIXTH_SCHEDULE-

electoral reservations for the Bodo community in the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC), along with sharing of power between the state government of Assam and the council. Although, in principle the Accord safeguarded the land rights of the non-tribals residing in BTAD and did not bar any citizen from acquiring land by way of inheritance, settlement or transfer if such persons were already residents of BTAD and were eligible for such bona fide acquisition of land. However, this clause was viewed by the Bodos as a strategy for continued appropriation of tribal land, while the non-Bodos felt that the Bodo leadership was violating this clause.

At this juncture, it is requisite to mention that scholars from the region like Udayon Misra (2012) deem that control over land lies at the heart of inter-ethnic contestation. Recurrent clashes on ethno-religious lines in the BTAD is the outcome of flawed and inconsistent (forest) policies being pursued since the colonial times, resulting in the marginalization of the plains tribal communities and the dispossession of their rights to land. Conversely, the current land policies in the state have to be situated in a historical context, especially given that the British colonial rule has been described as a 'crucial watershed' in the ecological history of India (Gadgil and Guha, 1993: 5). As Baruah (2001) notes, it was colonial rule that enabled the global expansion of the resource base of industrial societies as land and natural resources formerly managed by peasant societies was regulated by new rules of property that created the legal foundation for the industrial mode of resource use.

The colonial land settlement policy was to incorporate Assam into this new global resource use regime. Drawing on this, it must be stated that a major cause of the conflict has to be situated within the uneven demographics. Bodos constitute not more than thirty percent of the total population. Moreover, according to the Census of 2011, the tribal or Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of BTAD is around thirty-four percent of which ninety percent are Bodos. The non-tribals constitute the remaining sixty-three percent of the population, which includes Muslims (mostly of immigrant origin), Adivasis, Koch Rajbongshis, Assamese and Bengali Hindus. The Bodo accord of 2003 created a forty-six members council with thirty reserved seats for STs, five seats for non-STs, five seats for those belonging to unreserved categories and the remaining six seats to be nominated by the Governor of Assam. This means that nearly seventy-five percent of the seats are reserved for thirty percent of the citizens. However, as Misra (2012) notes that even after securing a measure of political autonomy, the Bodos realized that the demographic equation and, particularly, the land factor were not in their favor. More importantly there was discontentment in the way in which the land question was addressed in the Bodo Accord and encroachment in forest areas continued unabated post 2003. The desperation of the Bodo movement for a separate state was heightened by the fact that the notion of a homogeneous homeland within an extremely heterogeneous polity was

virtually unlikely, thus violence has been integral to the Bodo narrative for a separate homeland. As such this PhD dissertation intends to contribute to a better and nuanced understanding of the Bodo area conflict by focusing on forms of collective actions initiated by the ethnic others i.e. non-Bodo groups and also situating this conflict within a history of grievance pertaining to flawed colonial policies of immigration and eventual land alienation.

Furthermore, within the BTAD, this PhD dissertation specifically focuses on land allocated as Reserved Forests (RF). According to the Forest Survey of India (FSI), an organization under the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, the term Forest Area (FA) generally refers to all the geographic areas recorded as forest in government records and includes Reserved Forests (RF) and Protected Forests (PF), which have been constituted under the provisions of Indian Forest Act, 1927.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the history of forest policy and conservation in Assam is directly related to the growth and development of forest administration under the British colonial government (Tamuli and Choudhury 2009). As can be gathered from the above discussion, when several ethnic groups exist in a contiguous area where allocation and ownership of resources are rooted in contentious forms of politics and history, it becomes almost predictable that certain myths of origin, or historical claims (of sorts) become an arena of contestation for these social groups as has been the case in BTAD. Fascinatingly, it is the RF that emerged as the predominant site of conflict and contestation, counter insurgency operations, illegal forms of resource extraction and post-conflict rehabilitation of internally displaced persons. Moreover, more than one-third⁴ of the total landmass of BTAD is covered by forest. In Kokrajhar district, the headquarters of the BTAD, out of a total area of 3296 sq.km⁵, approximately 1719 sq. km⁶ is covered by RF and the notified forest area is comprised of six RF, namely Guma, Chirang-Riphu, Kachugaon, Ultapani, Bengtal and Manas. Considering that, the RFs are more than just vast stretches of forestland that have a historically important role in shaping the current conflict landscape, following an initial phase of exploratory fieldwork in the region in early 2014, I decided to focus on the Chirang-Riphu and Ultapani RF under the Haltugaon forest division in Kokrajhar district as my prime ethnographic site(s) of investigation.

Undoubtedly, a number of approaches could have been used to describe the intricate nature-society and the complex inter-ethnic relationships at play within the RF in postcolonial Assam. However, as I shall show, this dissertation has tried to refrain from using a framework focusing on classical environmental conservation or the much-used concepts of ethnicity and identity that have shaped

⁴ <https://www.telegraphindia.com/1130818/jsp/7days/17243027.jsp>

⁵ Census 2011

⁶ http://kokrajhar.gov.in/district_profile.html

most of the scholarship on northeast India. I situate this PhD at the interstices of the broader literature on political ecology of extraction, crisis conservation, livelihoods and violent conflict; intersection of the fields of studies that share similar epistemological and ontological underpinnings as seen through the works of Le Billon 2001; Peluso and Watts 2001; Benjaminsen, 2008; Cramer and Richards 2011; Richards 1996; Tania Li 1998, among others. Eventually my intent is to bring the material, political and social realities of everyday life in the RF characterized by conflict, (counter) insurgency, displacement and extraction within the same framework of analysis as the gradual processes that have led to the production and sustenance of these myriad forms of inter-ethnic relationships, illegal smuggling of forest commodities and encroachment. This PhD thesis shall underline the appropriation of RFs as sites of conflict and resettlement and also contribute to the overall debate around ‘violent environment’ (Peluso and Watts 2001). In their work on violent environments, Peluso and Watts bring back ecology into discussions of contemporary violence. They uphold the political relevance of environment that often gets reduced through a focus on resources. The environmental discourse within political ecology therefore should encompass processes of resistance, local cultures and political change, thereby moving away from discussions around neo-Malthusianisms in various forms. The authors view, “ violence as a site specific phenomenon, rooted in local histories and social relations yet connected to larger processes of material transformation and power relations” (2001: 5). This thesis takes the above discussion forward by applying it to a peripheral and sensitive space like that of the RF in which the politics of conservation and management of forest itself is embedded in a larger context of authority, autonomy, ethnic politics and a history of colonial policies into forest making. I further the political ecological aspects of the violent environment debate by examining how practices like forest management and nature conservation are introduced into these areas fraught with violence and forms of ethnic contestations and are carried out alongside counter-insurgency operations and other measures to restore rule of law and environmental protections. This shall further aid in advancing and strengthening the conceptual debates in political ecology dealing with conservation, counter-insurgency and violent conflict, through the addition of novel empirical insights.

1.4 Political Ecology: Of Extraction, Conservation and Counter-Insurgency

“...meanwhile India’s Northeast remains buffeted by ecological, economic and demographic pressures, with social inequities worsened by global commodity capitalism and migration and rivalries between the nation-states whose frontier it demarcates” (Sharma 2011,16).

Following the contextualization of conflict context in the previous section, I shift my gaze to the more pertinent inquiries relating to the theoretical and analytical framing and conceptualization of this PhD dissertation and the academic debates it engages with, augments to and builds on.

Certainly in line with the work of Donald Moore (2005), especially in the context of Assam and the BTAD it is an important exercise to observe how exactly the political and ecological landscape of Assam is being “sedimented with environmental resources, human livelihood practices and power relations” (Moore 2005: 2). The apprehensions over immigration and the ensuing competition between numerous ethnic groups for resources and political power has driven politics in Assam since the late 1970s, but have been exacerbated in recent years following the creation of BTAD in 2003. The establishment of BTAD brought in state and federal funding—the biggest source of revenue in a place with almost no industry—and Kokrajhar, became relatively prosperous. Paved roads replaced dirt tracks and cars became a more frequent sight; a state-funded National Institute of Technology came to town along with Bodoland University and other infrastructures like multi-storied hotels, supermarkets and multi-cuisine restaurants. However, as mentioned before, more than one-third of all land area in Kokrajhar district is covered by RF and the RF area starts soon after one leaves the town of Kokrajhar and gets onto the highway leading to Karigaon. On both sides of the highway, almost all land is protected forestland. A further two and a half hours drive north, through dirt roads leads to the Chirang-Riphu and Ultapani RF. The forestland is a contiguous area and lies along the northern tract of Kokrajhar district in the foothills of the Kingdom of Bhutan. These RF along the northern tract occupy an ancient alluvial plateau jutting out south from the Himalayan foothills. It is in these forests that I ground this dissertation, using a political ecology framework.

However, by doing so I stand the risk of finding myself in Piers Blaikie’s bandwagon of political ecology, as he argued in the nineties “[t]he notion of political ecology and the wheel share a similar characteristic. Both keep on being re-invented. The whole political ecology show is firmly on the road, and has become something of a band wagon” (Blaikie 1994: 1). Nevertheless, political ecology has emerged as a prodigious field especially since the early 1990s and political ecologists have in recent times taken convergences of power, culture and political economy as analytical entry points and have endeavored to incorporate discourse (meaning and practice) with the historical geography of material practice (Peluso and Watts 2001). Moreover, over the last two decades political ecology has tried to establish linkages between environment and politics and transform into some sort of an unified field, by providing tools for thinking about conflicts produced by forms of access to and control over (forest) resources. Engaging in this conversation by establishing theoretical and empirical linkages between violence, resource extraction, environment (read forest) and counter-insurgency especially taking into account the interplay of a variety of conflicting and competing actors (state and non-state) within the RFs, I believe I have done more than just climb into Blaikie’s bandwagon.

Now, political ecology is largely perceived as the study of nature-society relations, and as humans coproduce nature, political ecologists stress the importance to analyze the power processes imbibed

in these productions (Bryant and Bailey 1997). Political ecology consequently also focuses on the relational ties between natural resources (management) and violent conflict, and has advanced approaches that go for instance beyond the idea of the existence of a resource curse. Political ecology emerged as a radical critique of apolitical analyses of development and environmental interventions, their depoliticizing tendencies and dominance over the production of knowledge (Perreault, Bridge and McCarthy 2015). It aspires to recognize power structures in the knowledge production and reveal the structures of inequality and power hierarchies within these constructions (Peet and Watts 1996; Fairhead and Leach 1996). Hence, political ecology emphasizes “the means by which control and access of resources and property rights are defined, negotiated and contested within the political arenas of the household, the workplace, and the state” (Peet and Watts 1996: 239). However, according to Blaikie if political ecology were to make a difference in people’s lives “it would involve an examination and re-working of existing scientific information and local knowledge to include local values, economic exigencies and culture, policy reform, political strategy, media and public relations and networking among many others” (Blaikie 1994: 2).

Conversely, this PhD thesis draws more from the poststructuralist shift in political ecology which began in the 1990s with increased attention to local and micro studies of environmental movements, discursive and symbolic politics, and the institutional nexus of power, knowledge and practice (Watts 1998). However some scholars have criticized this new and increased focus of political ecology on politics, since this has relegated the position of ecology to the margins. Peter Walker (2005), for instance, jibed at these criticisms in a much anecdotal manner, “Mark Twain reportedly once responded to news reports of his demise by quipping that ‘rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated’”. The much-discussed demise of ecology in political ecology is likewise greatly exaggerated”. I consider this shift to be a necessary addition to the field by which political ecologists have emphasized on the political dimension of political ecology to explain the co-constitution of violence and conservation. This can be seen in the works of (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011; Le Billon 2008; Gregory and Pred 2007, among others). Rather than construing violence as coincident to conservation, or a necessary response in defense of nature, political ecologists nowadays analyze securitized conservation practices and rhetoric as strategies of state and subject formations. While establishing linkages between forest and resource conflicts, Watts and Le Billon study forests and other natural resources predominantly in terms of their exchange and strategic values, even where they examine these in terms of the making of “governable spaces” or the commodity-specific geographies of extraction (Le Billon 2001; Watts 2004). This is in line with a dynamic literature on resource wars that deliberates how the need to access strategic resources or the presence of extractable resources can generate or shape violent conflict (Klare 2002; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Ross 2004). Le Billon used a political ecology approach explicitly to frame war and postwar social

relations in forests. Using the case of Cambodia, Le Billon has revealed how shifting political conditions in and around a troubled but re-emergent nation-state led to the creation of a “new frontier of capitalism” (Le Billon 2001: 791) in the nation’s hitherto unexploited, timber-producing, forest areas.

Drawing from the above discussion it must be noted that political ecology is not one thing and there is no one theory or an analytical framework to which every political ecologist would adhere to. Paulson, Gezon and Watts (2003) note that in the past two decades, a basic notion of political ecology has been the piecing together of political economy and cultural ecology and its application across disciplines such as anthropology, biology, geography, and political science through research, analysis, and practice. Political Ecology could be considered as a multi-disciplinary field consisting of shared perspectives and common research agendas, sharing a number of basic assumptions, modes of explanations and theoretical orientations (Karlsson 2011). Nancy Li Peluso and Michael Watts have succinctly summed up the field as

Political ecology provide[s] the tools for thinking about conflicts and struggles engendered by the forms of access to and control over resources. Its attentiveness to power relations inherent in defining controlling and managing nature suggests an alternative way of viewing the link between environment and political action” (Peluso and Watts 2001: 24—25).

Therefore, this PhD thesis draws from and expands on the broader literature on the political ecology of extraction, conflict and conservation. Over the past decade there have been an increasing amount of political ecology studies centered on nature conservation and protected areas (particularly national parks in Africa) (for overviews see Adams and Hutton 2007; Neumann 2005; Robbins 2004). These scholarships have problematized the social constructiveness of nature and related environmental narratives or myths (see Cronon 1995), the displacement and exclusion of local people from national parks (Brockington, 2002), the disruption of livelihoods due to imposed restrictions of resource use (Ghimire 1991; Sodhi et al. 2007) and resulting conflicts between state authorities and local communities (e.g., Kull 2002; Neumann 1998).

Steering the above discussion towards a more regional focus of this PhD, it deserves mention that in the wider context of northeast Indian studies, the nature-society relationship has not really featured in major scholarship on the region. Moreover, there has hardly been any work on political ecology of northeast India in general, and barely any focusing on the political ecology literature that brings together extraction, conservation and conflict. Indeed the field is indebted to and can use as an entry point some very significant historical work on the ecological history of the region by Saikia (2008, 2011) and earlier works of Amalendu Guha (1972, 1977, 1980, 1983) focusing on the colonial processes of forest making in the state. Worth mentioning are recent work by Bengt

Karlsson on the political ecology of resource frontier (2011) using the case of forests in Meghalaya and Mitul Baruah's analyses of the political ecology of hazardscapes in Majuli in Assam (2016)⁷.

The broader and emergent literature on the political ecology of conservation indicates that conservation efforts can induce, or is implemented through, various forms of violence and contestations, and perpetrate structures of inequality (Brockington 2002; 2004; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2015; Lunstrum 2013, 2014; Neumann 1998; Ohja et. al. 2009). In this PhD, I explicitly draw from a rising interest in political ecology that sutures linkages between conservation, violence and conflict over contested resources that include wildlife parks and sanctuaries, especially where local, state-led conservation efforts rely on eviction of marginalized peasant communities while promoting tourism as a form of capital accumulation (Brockington and Wilkie 2015; Craven 2016; Duffy 2016; Lunstrum 2014; Massé and Lunstrum 2016; Peluso and Watts 2001). I apply this framework in the context of the RF where a vast array of actors and power relations operate, compete and conflate over access to forestland and resources. Such an approach further supplements the limitations associated with a linear political ecological framework of analysis. This holds particularly true since the larger notions of ethnic violence, conservation by the armed forces and livelihoods embedded in the timber commodity network looms large in understanding forms of inter-ethnic interactions and negotiations with state authorities while encroaching on forestland.

1.5 Illegal Timber Extraction and Conservation on War-footing

I use the political ecology of extraction framework to highlight and comprehend the ways in which the different state and non-state actors operate in the (non) level playing field within the RF. This also draws in many ways from Donald Moore's (1998a, 1998b, 1999) work that illustrates this latter approach by situating studies of micro politics within historicized state and colonial contexts. Moore's investigation into frictions between rural actors and representatives of the state in a protected area along a river in Zimbabwe exhibits how competing considerations of the landscape (pertaining to gender, education and the nature of one's authority) play a formative part in struggles that are simultaneously material and symbolic and that shape the dispersal of resource rights (Moore 1998a). Gezon (1995, 1997) likewise studied ecological politics in conflicts that occurred between villagers on the periphery of a protected area in Madagascar. Her analysis of transcripts of local trials administered by village elders uncovered the complex ways people use to establish and challenge rights to land access. People center their claims on a gamut of authority sources, ranging from norms of extended family rights to indigenous ethnic politics to state regulations and the moral and

⁷ Dr. Mitul Baruah has kindly shared his unpublished manuscript titled *Suffering for Land: Environmental Hazards and Popular Struggles in the Brahmaputra Valley (Assam), India* with me which he is in the process of turning into a book.

financial authority of international conservation organizations (Paulson, Gezon and Watts 2003).

I examine the above in the second article of this thesis, which depicts the myriad ways in which the different state and non-state actors operate in the (non) level playing field within the extractive timber economy, operating in a context of violent conflict and counter-insurgency. While this is not remarkable given the proliferation of literature on the linkages between resource extraction and conflict (Le Billon 2005, Snyder 2006, Goodhand 2005, Woods 2011) this has been often linked to conflict financing by armed groups. However, what I along with Bert Suykens, highlight is the way in which state, rebel and non-armed actors integrate in this extraction network. We also underline the way an ethnically segregated labor force has been integrated into the illegal timber economy, thereby illustrating the ways in which multiple ethnic groups (Bodo, Adivasi, Bengali Muslim) who are in the larger narrative of the conflict considered to be hostile with each other, liaise in the illegal timber economy. These are the local forms of engagement in the political ecological spheres within specific contexts in which power and politics operate, together with related discourses and representations of the environment through which people communicate, especially within the South Asian context of multiple ethnic groups on lines of caste, class and gender.

Adding to the scholarship on political ecology of conservation focused on protected areas and park is a growing body of research addressing what Büscher and Ramutsindela have termed ‘green violence,’ outlined as ‘the deployment of violent instruments and tactics towards the protection of nature’ (2016: 2). The predominant focus of this discussion has been the application of such violence by representatives of nation-state regimes that frequently include forest guards, para-military forces and national armed forces. Using the case of increasing militarization of the Kruger National Park in South Africa, Lunstrum (2014) argues that this is not an isolated instance of such violent form of conservation by the military; rather it reflects a wider and deepening pattern of militarization altering conservation practice around the world. National armed forces, for instance, have performed important roles in establishing conservation measures, often forcibly across South America, Asia and countries across Africa. This has been seen in Guatemala, Colombia, Nepal, Indonesia, Congo, Cameroon, South Africa, among many others and in case of Botswana, the protection of its national parks is one of its Defense Force’s primary responsibilities (Peluso 1993; Henk 2006; Ojeda 2012; Ybarra 2012; Ethirajan 2013; Piombo 2013). In the case of India, drones have recently been introduced in the Kaziranga National Park (KNP) in Assam where around twenty-four persons (allegedly poachers) were killed in and around the core area of KNP in the year 2014 (Barbora 2017). The death toll has risen since then with the arming of forest guards with sophisticated arms and ammunition and shoot at sight operations. Similarly, the RF in BTAD has surfaced simultaneously as a site of conservation and counter-insurgency (COIN) operations (by the Indian Armed Forces

and the Para-militaries) as well as inter-institutional competition between the Ecological Task Force⁸ (ETF), of the Indian Army (set up through the mandate of the central government) and the state forest department. By focusing on conservation on war footing in actual conflict zones by a wing of the Indian Army, this thesis also seeks to address the intersection between important themes in political ecology and debates about violence and conflict within the peripheral zones of the RFs. By empirically studying the case of the ETF, in the fourth article I explain how a range of different actors, operating at different scales, react to the specific challenges of conservation in ‘violent environments’ and co-constitute each other. Within the BTAD both the forest department, which comes under the state government and the ETF that has been constituted under federal jurisdiction are in charge of conservation. This of course leads to occasional inter-institutional friction and blame game. Moreover, my approach and analysis here digresses from the literature on the structural and symbolical forms of violence associated with ‘green violence’ (Büscher and Ramutsindela 2015) ‘green wars’ (Ybarra 2012; Büscher and Fletcher 2018), and ‘green militarisation’ (Lunstrum 2014; Duffy 2014). Rather I focus on how wider geographies of violent conflict and forms of domination, feed into conservation efforts, in a situation with multiple agencies entrusted with the task of conservation. I also explore how armed forms of conservation practices are caught up in local conflict contexts. Although existing literature suggests a merging of counter-insurgency and conservation practices (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018), using an inter-institutional and multilayered approach to conservation, my case demonstrates that counter-insurgency prevails over conservation within the RF. In this way, the thesis further contributes to the larger body of political ecological literature by also addressing the gap wherein conflict and conservation have been so far seen as disjoint processes. By emphasizing on place and site-specific studies of militarization (Bernazzoli and Flint 2009) and by empirically situating the working of the ETF within the larger micro political context of the region, I show that despite the ETF’s best efforts to buffer itself from local violent politics, events and incidents of a political nature seeps into its operations.

1.6 “We are encroachers in the forest” — Of Space and Legal Geography

“For legal geographers, as for socio-legal scholars more generally, law is less a thing – like a giraffe, say, than a dynamic, shifting, often contradictory, multi-point process – like the movements of a swarm of hornets”. (Deanley 2013: 98).

From the above discussion it is now clear that the RF over time have emerged as a site of violent contestation, conservation and (il)legal forms of extraction and encroachment. The focus of this

⁸The 135 Infantry Battalion of the ETF, also it’s most recent, was set up in 2007 in the Haltugaon forest division within the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) of Assam

thesis on space and illegal and/or informal practices requisites me to propose a common frame of analysis using legal geography to better comprehend how “law and space actively shape and constitute society, while being themselves continuously socially produced” (Blandy and Sibley 2010: 278). Space here more specifically refers to the RFs, the production of which has been a saga of colonial and post-colonial legal processes.

Therefore, it is important to understand this spatial dimension of the RF and its conceptualization within political ecology of extraction and conservation, especially focusing on the legal aspects of forest making and access. Forest making and access to forest resources in India has been a colonial process hedged in several legal restrictions on the utilization of these resources. It was from the 1870s that the newly established provincial forest department in Assam began to affirm its sole right over the provincial forest resources (Saikia 2008). Therefore, the end goal of the project of land settlement in Assam culminated towards shifting of large amounts of Assam’s land and forest resources from the control of the peasantry - both settled and shifting cultivators - and hunter gatherers to the colonial state. However, not much changed in the post-colonial process of management of forestlands. As Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan write (in particular reference to Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of developing post-colonial India): “... portraying romantic visions of landscapes while transforming it profoundly— the colonial and postcolonial states converge in their relationship to nature” (Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan 2006: 31).

Not surprisingly, the issue of land has emerged at the heart of recurring ethno-political conflict in the region (See Mishra 1999, 2012, 2013; Barbora 2002, 2008; Hazarika 2000; Baruah 1999; Vandekerckhove 2009). Given that in India’s Northeast ethnicity has always been a very fluid and often socially constructed reality, the identification, classification, and geographical ascription of certain ethnic groups to (forest)land, in combination with the selective attribution of rights along such lines, set the stage for endless disputes about who belonged and who did not or rather who possessed a legal right over land and who did not (Vandekerckhove 2009).

Although, studies have shown that forest policies and acts claim to conserve and provide equitable distribution of forest resources among the human population (Gadgil and Guha 1992, 1994; Bandopadhyay 2010; Rangarajan and Sivaramkrishnan 2012), there are ample instances of state(s) using its power to exclude forest-dependent communities from their rights to livelihood (Khanna 2005 and Kumar 2012). In India, the administration of ‘reserved’ and ‘protected’ forests lies with the state forest department. However, in case of BTAD, the Bodoland Territorial Council’s department of forest administers these areas, since ‘forest’ is a transferred subject according to the second Bodo Accord of 2003. Therefore, the Bodo movement for autonomy was a struggle to regain control over their traditional territory, which also included the RF. These forests are called *Kachari*⁹ *Dooars*,

⁹ An old name for the Bodo

regarded as ancestral land and was used as a trade route to Bhutan by the Bodos and other tribes in the pre-colonial era (Kimura 2018). In the colonial period, these lands were declared as wasteland and brought under the British administration excluding all rights of usage, entry and access to the local tribal population. Those who continue to dwell inside the RF are considered as encroachers. This notion of encroachment entered the administrative vocabulary approximately in the 1940s, when peasants from East Bengal cleared forestlands in contravention of the Revenue Department directive (Saikia 2008). The RF has always been the worst hit in the region and have not only emerged as the center of conflict (Kimura 2018) but also as a gray zone of informal economies and practices.

Therefore, RF exists as a space that is supposedly (read legally) fully under the control of state administration, specifically the forest department, but in effect only partially controlled by it. Such areas are not new, but have history. Consequently, the political ecology of extractive practices including forms of encroachment and retaliatory eviction and conservation cannot be separated from the nature of legal dimensions embedded in the access to and management of forest land, which necessitates taking the ‘legal’ into account. I use spatiality as a concept in the sense that space and place can be viewed not as given entities existing outside of social practice and human experience, but as the product of social practice (see for example, Gregory 1994a; Pile and Thrift 1992; Soja 1989).

It is this centrality of space and forms of (il)legalities that operate in the RF that determines the relationship between state and (il)legal practices (Heyman and Smart 1999). Therefore, the use of a framework drawing on legal geography complements the political ecological structures of analysis owing to the dissertation’s crucial focus on the relationship between people, space and law. Moreover, the RF are *de facto* owned and controlled by the state. So, by adding the component of how law operates (or not) in these spaces pertaining to processes of land occupation and resource extraction, also aids in discerning how everyday rules and regulations are being (re)constructed, de-constructed and negotiated among the various authority structures as well as competing ethnic groups. I deliberate on this in more detail in article three where I discuss forms of (il)legal practices using the notion of *dokhol*¹⁰.

Dovetailing the above, it warrants mention that in the late 1990s a spurt of research was published on the roles and relationships of differentiated actors in multiple sites of inquiry and ‘spaces’ of environmental negotiation (for an overview see Gezon 1997, 1999; Harvey 1996; Li 1999; Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997; Paulson 2000). In recent times, there has been a growing interest among political ecologists in engaging theorizations of the social production of space to investigate the co-constitution of nature, space, and society (e.g., Neumann 2001; Perreault 2003; Whitehead et

¹⁰ A Bengali/Assamese word which translates to occupy by force

al. 2007; Roth 2008; Rangan and Kull 2008). Moreover, political ecology as a framework by itself doesn't help in developing an in-depth understanding of local socio political engagements by these forest dwellers with the state since these negotiations go beyond institutions of governance to encompass struggles over human practice, meaning, and representation in relation to the environment and livelihoods.

This is where legal geography comes in handy, since spatiality is the state of existing within or having some relationship with space, and legal geographers seek to investigate spatiality by showing how legal provisions and practices relate to space" (Bennet and Layard 2015). Legal geography itself is a relatively new field of inquiry, which can be traced back to the edition of the *Legal Geographies Reader* (Blomley et al. 2001). As Delaney (2014: 96) points out in the project that brought the disciplines of law and geography together, "suffice it to say that one of the principal aims of the project is bringing the insights and resources associated with one field to bear on the interests and concerns of the other." He further adds that yet another goal has been "bringing the sensibilities of a now distinctive legal geographic mode of inquiry to broader social and social-theoretic questions" (ibid.97). Moreover, legal geography's engagement with time and historicity and with materialities and affect (Bennet and Layard 2015; Hatcher 2017) also enhances the discourse on how forestland is being gradually encroached upon while being legally administered, monitored and managed by the state forest officials.

Analysis of legal geographers like Davina Cooper (1999) assumes prominence in this context. She notes that investigating the production of illegality confronts the idea that laws are unambiguously enacted by states. Instead, a "symbiotic relationship" exists between state and illegal practices and, especially, the "varied actors inside and around states who maneuver actual legality and illegality in complex ways" (Heyman and Smart 1999: 11). This also ties in with Schendel and Abraham's (2005) 'illegal but licit' framework which further broadens and forces these forms of spatial-legal analysis to include flows and actions that are located in a zone where a mismatch exists between the state's formal political authority and non-formal social authority of the non-state actors.

Winnowing this in the RF, the categorization of encroachment of forest land and by that logic of the entire forest squatter settlements and the practice of extraction of resources as illegal is, therefore, muddled by addressing their entangled and reciprocal association with a disaggregated state (like the forest officials, army and paramilitary among others) and consequently how this relation develops over time within specific historical and geographical trajectories, pertaining to environmental protection, management and conservation. While most work in legal geography adheres to distinctive practices associated with statist institutions (legislatures, international organizations, administrative agencies, courts, the police, and so on) "interest has also surfaced in other non-state actors, events, and expressions of the legal such as forms of ordinary legal consciousness, customs (Nagarajan and

Parashar 2013); norms (Konzen 2013), and even the house rules of an English pub” (Delaney 2013: 97). These environmental aspect of the RF as a site in which conflict occurs must be constructed in a “broader sense to contain within it a panoply of environmental uses, and forms of extraction, conservation and rehabilitation” (Peluso and Watts 2001: 5).

Methodologically, ethnography is one of legal geography’s favored methods and a political ecological analysis working in that vein can build up a site and situation’s story working upward and outward from the local, towards more abstract, thus shaping forces and delineating their actual localized effects. “Such site or spatially focused ethnographically inclined studies also often have an attentiveness to the materiality of law, showing how it exists embodied within things (documents, buildings, street layouts and signs, habitats and creatures) and people upon the site” (Bennett and Layard: 67). This is how I believe, that political ecological discourses centering on (il)legal extraction, forms of occupation and conservation; and legal geography’s notion of spatial-legal relations which ratify that dominant constructions of law and space are actively performed in a sense of “becoming” (c.f. Massey: 2005; Blomley: 2013), come together in a common frame of analysis to advance theorization of a political ecological analysis of extraction and conflict in spaces of statist legal institutions and objects.

1.7 Political Ecology (and Economy) of Livelihoods

“In short, to say that someone has a right to land is to summarize in one word a complex and highly conditional state of affairs which depends on the social, political and economic context. The place, the setting, the history, the moment, all matter”. (Sally Falk Moore 1998: 33)

The RFs in BTAD are sites for livelihood generation. The forest dwellers (termed encroachers) engage in practices pertaining to cutting, collecting and selling firewood, hunting and fishing, gathering medicinal herbs and plants and subsistence agricultural activities on the land encroached. As already discussed, these activities are not necessarily deemed legal by the forest department and these encroachers are either reprimanded or eventually (often temporarily) evicted. The forest as a site for subsistence livelihood production is embedded in conditions where the daily routines of making a living in the midst of violence are often considered illegal acts in the eyes of the government.

I also mentioned how the forests and ensuing wastelands in the colonial times were brought under state administration with the aim of profit generation through the sale of timber. Additionally, timber requirements for railway were the first and the most formidable forces resulting in thinning of the Indian forests (Sarma 2012). This coupled with the conversion of so-called ‘wastelands’ into tea plantations further alienated the forest dwellers from accessing the forest. As Jayeeta Sharma (2011:20) writes in *Empire’s Garden*, “Imperial capital and enterprise transformed Assam into a

plantation economy characterized as much by rapid demographic change as by the visible emergence of ordered tea-gardens and rice-fields in place of forested, riverine and commons lands.”

Therefore, the second, third and to some extent the fourth article in this dissertation can be situated within the framework of rural livelihoods or the political ecology (and economy) of livelihoods which is of course closely connected with the political ecology of resource extraction and encroachment, as already discussed. The rural livelihood crises in the RF is multi-faceted, rooted predominantly in restricted or no access to land, loss of the land and make-shift houses built on it due to eviction, natural disasters like flood, erosion and earthquakes, attack by wild animals and conflict. Although most of the policy and academic debates (as shall be clear from the discussion) has focused more on the economic angle of sustainable livelihood, notwithstanding the importance of an economic perspective, I lean more towards an ecological conceptualization of livelihoods, which I discuss below.

Topics that could be categorized under livelihood studies have been studied for a long time within a range of varied disciplines in both natural and social sciences, including “village studies, household economics and gender analyses, farming systems research, agro-ecosystem analysis, rapid and participatory appraisal, studies of socio-environmental change, political ecology, sustainability science and resilience studies (and many other strands and variants)” (Scoones 2009: 174). However, it was with the emergence of the idea of sustainable livelihoods in the late-1980s that livelihood studies became a more formalized area of inquiry. Analysis of the relationships between forests and economic opportunity fits well with the concept of sustainable livelihoods that a number of development agencies are adopting. Chambers and Conway (1991) made the foremost contributions towards the conceptualization and implementation of sustainable livelihoods, which is the integration of capability, equity and sustainability. Their primary focus was on the rural populations in developing nations. For them sustainability falls under two groups—environmentally in its effects on local and global resources and socially whether it can cope with shocks and stress and still retain the capability to continue and improve. Chambers and Conway’s (1992: 6) paper has become foundational in livelihoods studies. They defined livelihoods as:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, while not undermining the natural resource base.

Chambers and Conway’s was a much broader framing of livelihoods that encompassed varied concerns. In the 1990s, this idea of ‘sustainable livelihoods’ gained salience particularly with DfID, the UK Department for International Development Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). Drawing on the work of Chambers and Conway (1992), DfID defines “livelihood” as comprising

“the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living”. Care International defines livelihoods as the way people access resources, what gets in the way of access, how resources are used to build assets and crucially how assets reduce people’s vulnerability to poverty and disasters. Therefore, the RFs in BTAD with all its resources ranging from land to trees seem to be playing a key role in livelihood opportunities.

Nonetheless, as I hinted at above, the dominant livelihoods scholarship and approaches have largely been narrow and economistic in focus (Scoones 2009; Carr 2015). This is also apparent in Chambers and Conway’s (1991) emphases on availability of security for rural communities, especially since assets (economic) are vulnerable, grains and homes can be set on fire (during conflict) or lost in floods, and claims may be lost post the death of the head of the household. This is indicative of how sustainable livelihood practices have to transcend above economistic goals of wage generation, savings and wealth creation, especially on the fact of environmental disasters like floods, erosion and earthquakes and political events like conflicts and evictions (in the context of the RF). Carr points out that this distinctive focus on capitals in the sustainable livelihoods approach presumes an economizing logic, which adheres to the idea that “livelihoods are principally about the maintenance and improvement of the material conditions of life.” (Carr 2013: 80). Conversely, a political ecological and not merely economical understanding of livelihoods helps us envision livelihoods in a more holistic way moving beyond the narrow econocentrism of traditional livelihoods frameworks and approaches. Carr (2015: 332) explains political ecology and livelihoods studies as “natural partners” – as both must take into account the local environmental/agricultural decision-making processes within the broader/extra-local, political, social, economic practices and discourses and pay due attention to questions of power as well as biophysical nature. Bebbington (1999), for example, has noted how assets are not merely means of living for people, but they also give meaning to people’s life. Carr (2013: 103) further adds that this framing of livelihoods “urges us to engage with the complex, differentiated desires, aspirations, interests, and beliefs held by different actors who come together in the projects of rule we call livelihoods strategies”. In a similar vein, for Bebbington, livelihood is much more than the material conditions for mere survival. Scholars engaged in the political ecological analysis of livelihoods have posited livelihoods within the conceptual frameworks of “capabilities”¹¹ (Bebbington 1999), “environmental entitlements” (Leach et al. 1997; cf. Sen 1984; Dreze and Sen 1989), “spatiality” of livelihoods (King 2011), and the broad concerns of environmental conservation (Batterbury 2001; Bebbington and Batterbury 2001; De Haan and Zoomers 2005; Goldman 2011; McCusker and Carr 2006).

¹¹ The word capability was used by the development economist Amartya Sen (1984, 1987; Dreze and Sen 1989) referring to the ability to perform certain basic functioning in relation to what a person is capable of doing and being. It includes, among other things, to be adequately nourished, avoid escapable morbidity, to lead a life without shame and to keep a track of what is going on).

My examination of the various forms and ways of what would constitute as precarious livelihoods within the RFs, given the prevalence of unequal rights in terms of access to forest resources, recurring episodes of conflict resulting in loss of lives and possessions, natural disasters like floods and destruction of homes and crops owing to attacks from wild animals like elephants, draws on these political ecological approaches. It brings together the questions of scale, power, authority and role of natural (forest) resources in rural livelihoods. The access to resources and opportunities within the RFs is differential in nature and is decided by several factors as, belonging to a certain ethnic group (for example Bodos and Muslims seem to have an upper hand in the timber trade as compared to Adivasis), ways of negotiating and deliberating with forest officials (as highlighted in the third article on ways in which Adivasi populations construct temporary forms of housing and prefer going deeper into the forest to hide from the gaze of the state), social and economic networks within the RFs (the whole process of encroaching land through brokers), patronage and clientelistic forms of political accommodation as witnessed in times of elections, among others. Involvement in the timber trade, farming on forestland and resisting evictions is not mere survival rather a way of life and the connection with the RFs is intimate rather than just material. Therefore, the rural populations are far from being mere subjects to the violent power struggle and exercise agency (again not rooted in material forms of income) by opposing, coping with and overcoming environmental and political distresses.

At this juncture I would also like to clarify what I mean by agency in this specific context as I have taken the liberty of ascribing agency to my interlocutors and the local population living in an environment characterized by precarity and uncertainty. Agency here is more in line with Veena Das's usage of the term in her book *Life and Words* (2007). Das talks about how our theoretical impulse "is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than as a descent into it" (2007:7).

This picture of descending into the minutiae of the everyday and finding resources for survival enables us, as Cavell notes in his foreword to *Life and Words*, to observe how "life...knit(s) itself back into some viable rhythm pair by pair" (2007:xiv). Therefore, I view exercising of agency as a descend into the minutiae of the everyday and finding resources for survival either through everyday forms of negotiations with the state (the way communities continue to encroach and negotiate with the different state actors), finding for livelihoods opportunities through engaging in the timber trade or participating in democratic processes and forms of collective action which I enumerate in chapter three. Agency therein contains the ability to not just endure and survive but also in making everyday decisions on the face of extreme economic and political crisis. Within this thesis I limit agency to its human form and do not take into consideration agency of the nonhuman and its co-constitutiveness with the contingent category of the human. The quality of bodily or human agency is expressed

through awareness, mobility and liveness.

Additionally, at the heart of (il)legal and (in)formal livelihood practices and approaches lie the incidences of recurring conflict, displacement and resettlement, factors that topple this notion of livelihoods being sustainable. Rural livelihoods in these contexts remain highly vulnerable and uncertain owing to the larger turbulent political landscape of the region. However, Bebbington (1999) is right in cautioning us against focusing too narrowly on just natural resources and agriculture in rural livelihoods studies, since rural livelihoods need to diversify, especially when faced with fast and unpredictable depletion of natural resources. Tania Li (2011: 295) made a similar observation in noting that instead of wanting to stick to their “locally oriented production on small family farms”, rural populations actually like to escape such livelihoods in favor of new forms of livelihoods and labor regimes. I agree with the above authors that in the quest to lean towards a more political ‘ecological’ framing of livelihoods, rural livelihoods should not be essentialized as natural resources centric. However, as my study in the RF and other protected forest areas of BTAD revealed, the absence of alternative resources, and due to the growing phenomenon of what Li (2011: 281), in a different context, calls the “educated unemployed,” rural livelihoods in the BTAD continue to be heavily dependent on natural resources extracted from the forest. However, recurring violent conflict and displacement coupled with adverse environmental factors and differential access to land and other forest resources has caused much distress to the livelihood systems.

With this discussion, I hoped to have advanced and contributed to the critical debate in rural livelihoods, often submerged in precarious forms of existence.

1.8 The Notion of ‘Everyday’ and Northeast Indian Studies

So far I have focused on the theoretical debates this PhD engaged with and seeks to advance on. Yet another concept that I have dealt with in this PhD thesis is the notion of everyday and how that operates in the RF within a context of recurring conflict, suffering and displacement. Expanding on this notion of everyday and/or ordinary through the lens of lived-experiences of conflict in my fifth and final article, I aim to bring the material, political and social realities of everyday-life in these fragile spaces. This assumes further significance since for scholars within the Agambenian (explained below) trajectory especially within the framework of Northeast Indian studies, the question of survival beyond emergency and the move beyond incapacitation is often equated with the notion of (spectacular) bodily resistance. This analysis more often than not also tends to dwell on some major and iconic points of reference—the killing of Thangjam Manorama resulting in the subsequent “naked protest” by the Manipuri Imas and the (now suspended) hunger

strike by Sharmila Irom.¹² I situate the notion of everyday in the face of such forms of spectacular bodily resistance to show that this is not the only way in which survival can be imagined. My idea has been to capture the uneventful as the locus of survival, which becomes the everyday. My goal here has been to operationalize everyday through the examination of how ordinary lives unfold under a specific set of conditions (violent or not) that eventually normalizes or neutralizes uneven and enforced forms of legality. A case in point is the eviction of forest dwellers in the RF. The notion of everyday encompasses within it the recognition of violence as a ubiquitous way of interaction for economic and political negotiations. This notion of everyday, aids in slowing down the vertiginous and oftentimes incapacitating scale of the rushed encounters with forms of terror and physical violence.

I shall now steer the discussion towards the specific contribution this thesis makes to the broader field of Northeast Indian studies.

As can be gathered from the discussion until now, rather than focusing directly on the causes and affects of the recurring episodes of ethnic violence, I have shifted my gaze to understand the local physical environment in which the conflict occurs and the social, political and economic processes that operate within the realms of everyday spaces. I have also taken into account the demographic heterogeneity and studied how the various actors (state and non-state) are embedded within these processes. The actors, particularly those who continue to suffer through and from the effects of recurring conflict assume extreme significance in the way they exercise agency and decent into and navigate through the quotidian, the mundane and the ordinary transcending the domains of the symbolic and the spectacular choreographies of violence and death. In the overt emphasis on deciphering the causes of violence and the conceptualization of such spaces as exceptional or spectacular, what gets lost in the process is the minutiae of the everyday and a contention with ordinariness, as has been found in the works of Veena Das 2008; Linda Green 2010; Daniel 1996; Vigh 2008; Finnstrom 2008.

Therefore, when it comes to situating this study within the larger body of scholarly work on northeast India, an underlying concern has been to interrogate the theoretical limitations of the Agambenian framing of the region as a zone or “state of exception” or “bare life”¹³ through a

¹²The naked protest was conducted by a group of elderly women collectively named *Imas* (mothers) in front of the Indian army cantonment to protest the rape and murder of Thangjam Manorama. Sharmila Irom ended her 16-year long hunger strike against the AFSPA in August 2016. For discussions of Irom’s hunger strike, see Mehrotra 2009; Bhonsle 2016. For readings of the naked protest see Papori Bora 2012; and Vajpeyi 2009.

¹³ Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, urges a reconsideration of theories of sovereignty as put forward ‘from Hobbes to Rousseau’ (1998: 109). The theory of sovereign power offered by the book is based on the state of exception (drawn from Carl Schmitt who established the contiguity between the state of exception and sovereignty by defining the sovereign as “he who decides on the state of exception”, in *Political Theology* 1922) and the production of a bare, human life caught in the sovereign ban, which constitutes the threshold of the political

consideration of the categories of the everyday, the ordinary, survival and endurance. As Duncan McDuie-Ra writes referring mainly to the prevalence of the AFSPA, “The Northeast is exceptional and the rest of India is normal” (McDuie-Ra 2009, 262). He further adds that this binary is bridged through events in which particular individuals migrate to the rest of India to live and work, and vice versa, as well as through networks like that of women’s organizations, environmentalists and human rights activists. “Yet in the majority of interactions this binary is constant” (McDuie-Ra 2009: 262). Besides, scholars like Sanjib Baruah has also identified AFSPA in the northeast of India as a permanent regime of exception to the law that is supposed to be the default all across the Indian Union (Baruah 2007). This rubric of exceptionality is what Vajpayee (2009) accustoms to think about the northeast and Jammu and Kashmir. Singh however argues that exceptional contexts only gain impetus when placed beside normal contexts, and thus “the normal . . . stands outside and parallel to the exception, and yet is integrally related to it . . . the exception cannot have any meaning unless there is a normal situation that offsets it” (2007: 19). In fact McDuie-Ra also makes a digression on his theory of exceptionalism in the case of northeast in his book *Northeast Migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail* by critiquing the predominance of “greed and grievance” scholarship on this region and argues that academic and policy studies on the “Northeast tend to focus on the causes of violence rather than its effects on everyday life” (McDuie-Ra 2013: 17).

In the final article of this dissertation using a phenomenology of lived experience framework, this underlying concern surfaces, as I pay closer attention to the distinctly ordinary ways through which populations survive and endure states of dispossession, displacement and abandonment. As ethnographies of war torn societies demonstrate, life under conditions in which violence is naturalized is marked by a form of collective nervousness, embodied fear or ontological insecurity that permeates every sphere of society (see Feldman 1991; Aretxaga 1997). Violence then is understood as producing its own social order within which everyday forms of social, economic and political processes are embedded.

I have used the notion of everyday in two senses in the second and fifth article, respectively, which do overlap. It is used as a rupture in the life worlds caused by the extreme anxieties of the terrifying event(s), and as a more dispersed, diffused and mundane form where the event and the quotidian cannot be separated clearly (this is more apparent in the case of forest encroachers and their everyday forms of (informal) negotiations with the state). Veena Das (2012) in this context, entreaties for a closer attention to localized narrative formations of existence and belief that in the immediate surroundings, and that persist and provide resources for the remaking of worlds. Therefore, what I show through this PhD is that one does not necessarily have to abjure the exception

community.

to reach the everyday rather I push my case towards rethinking and reimagining the quotidian within states of emergency.

If Political Ecology as a discipline seeks to study the relationships between nature and society within a context of violent conflict, then this framework would have to include within it those societal actors who endure and survive through conflict and what constitutes their everyday forms of survival and coping. This echoes with what Jonathan Spencer (2003: 12) writes, “those who live in the war zone both adapt themselves to the social and spatial contexts, and transform space to suit their own needs and practices”, I have shown these processes in the context of the RF and how it emerges as a space of conflict, competition, suffering, encroachment and livelihood generation. Of course there are limitations to adaptation in such precarious space and it is often determined by as far as the geography of risk and uncertainty allows the populations to do so. This further resonates with Benedikt Korf’s writing in the context of Sri Lankan civil war (Korf 2014). He notes that in contrast to a widespread perception, civilian life does not cease in war-affected areas. In fact wars and/or violent conflict do not create a vacuum — rather the local population has to devise ways of surviving and coping in the context of a dramatic increase in risk and uncertainty, political instability, violence and economic decline. Moreover, in this thesis I have tried to go beyond the framing of resistance both in its spectacular bodily forms as well as collective forms of action (I have illustrated this in my third and fifth articles respectively) My focus rather has been on resistance through which one transcends the everyday, since the more physical and collective forms are not the only form through which survival can be encountered or imagined. As Veena Das writes in *Life and Words* (2006, 7) about how our theoretical impetus, “is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than as a descent into it”. Finally, in the zeal to qualify the exceptional, Northeast Indian studies have often lost sight of the quotidian. Focusing on material practices and discursive constructions of the ordinary in the spectacular, I view this thesis as some sort of a course-correction.

1.9 Organization of the PhD Thesis

As should be clear by now, this PhD is a collection of five separate articles, of which some have been published, others are forthcoming or have been submitted to a journal and are currently under review. At the beginning of each article, I furnish the requisite background information and the details of the original publication. I decided to regard the formats in which I published or submitted the articles. Therefore, in terms of style, some are written in American English, while others keep the British spelling.

Below I provide a brief summary of each of the articles.

Part I comprises of **one article**, which sets the tone of this PhD by providing the socio-political context and also describing the research site. Using the Lok Sabha or the national Parliamentary

elections of 2014 as a nodal point, in this article I explain how ‘contentious politics’ unfurled by means of collective political action by non-Bodos and had an impact in BTAD. The mobilization and political realignments that took place are indicative of a larger discourse about identity and ethnic politics in BTAD that coincides with a history of ethno-social, cultural and political subjugation faced by the non-Bodo community against a background of questionable policies, including ethnic delimitation and arbitrary appeasements that resulted in the drawing of boundaries along ethnic and religious lines. I further argue that it is the politicization of identity, mistrust and long-term grievances that led to the political mobilization of the non-Bodo population. I also examine the intimate association between electoral politics and the production of collective ethnic identities. The central idea of this article is to provide an understanding of the intricacies of the 2014 parliamentary elections by focusing on the shift in ethno-political alliances, the mobilization of non-Bodos, ethnic competition, and co-operation for political gains.

Part II consists of **three** articles. In the **second article** along with Bert Suykens, we interrogate the ways in which state, rebel, and non-armed actors integrate in the timber extraction network. We further argue that the multiple authority structures are not integrating on a level-playing field and there are important limits to the negotiated character of their interactions. Their individual capacity for violence—what some might consider their de facto sovereign qualities—and connection to a greatly disaggregated state, as well as the spatial logic of the timber extraction chain itself allows different forms of authority to claim differentiated access to rents. We also underline the manner in which an ethnically differentiated labor force has been integrated into the illegal timber economy. We illustrate the way in which multiple ethnic groups (Bodo, Adivasi, Bengali Muslim), who are in the larger narrative of the conflict considered at odds with each other, are deployed in the illegal timber economy. While this points toward inter-ethnic collaboration across conflict lines in order to make trees into marketable hardwood product, our case does not corroborate liberal peace assumptions about potential transformations of economic collaboration into political appeasement. Not only is the deployment of labor spatially divided, the relations of exchange in the labor chain are highly unequal, mediated as they are by violence and political and social exclusion. While focusing on an illegal timber economy, we also seek to emphasize on the functioning of the authority structure or “constellation of power” in BTAD and the way populations relate to it in a combination of coercion (power) and consent (authority).

Using the politics of *dokhol* (“to grab or occupy by force”) as an entry point, in the **third** article, I examine the comparative epistemologies of squatting and informality in urban and rural contexts. My intent is to unpack the everyday practice, maintenance, and sustenance of *dokhol* within the RF of BTAD. This entails an extension of existing scholarship on formal-informal dichotomies in relation to rural squatters, in particular those on forestland. I do so by combining an ethnographic

study of *dokhol* by rural squatters with three influential strands of critical scholarship on urban squatting, namely Partha Chatterjee's "political society," Asaf Bayat's "quiet encroachment," and Ananya Roy's take on planning and deregulation. I conclude the article by advancing the case of rural informalities and call for a dialogue between the two forms of informalities – rural and urban, especially in the context of South Asia.

In the **fourth** article, I draw on the Ecological Task Force (ETF) of the Indian Army, more specifically the 135 Battalion of the Territorial Army posted in Kokrajhar district. By expanding on existing conceptual and theoretical views on 'green militarization' and 'violent environments' in the context of poaching and national parks within the critical conservation literature, I apply it to the RF in the BTAD. I explain how the politics that surround conservation in these RFs is immersed within a context of ethno-religious conflict. I further recourse to regional environmental history, to analyze how ethno-religious conflict influences modes of conservation exemplified by continuing inter-institutional competition between the forest department and the ETF. Drawing from the emerging literature on the nexus between conservation and counter-insurgency, I argue that in fragile and violent political contexts like the RF in BTAD, counter-insurgency prevails over conservation. Additionally, I highlight that despite ETF's efforts to buffer from local politics, incidents of a political nature seep into its operations, e.g. ambushed by militants during conservation activities.

Part III consists of the **fifth** article, where I propose a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of those living through these chronic crisis contexts in the BTAD. Such an exploration feeds into the need for what I term an intimate ethnography of the region and of those who have suffered – my interlocutors, especially since the past decade forms of non-traditional and humanistic ethnography with a goal of reaching out has been gaining momentum in anthropology. Drawing on two empirical cases – the first being a post conflict relief camp at the immediate aftermath of conflict in 2014 and the second being a village that I visited two years after the violence of 2012. I show how these sites reveal, within the immediate context of a temporary relief camp, the abject loss and magnitude of suffering is visible through imageries of physical destruction of property, bullet injuries on bodies and extreme emotions either through hysterical outburst or haunting silences. Whereas within the gradual context of a village, two years after the episode of conflict it is the memories that begin to take shape and everyday chores are exercised with caution and imposition of restricted mobility in social interactions. Although the material culture of violence lingers, physical violence ceases to be the centrifugal part of life, at least temporarily. The ongoing conflict here is comprehended as an embodied accommodation of imminent and ever-present danger.

In the **concluding** chapter, I bring together and expand on the arguments presented in the different articles included in this PhD thesis to transcend the more narrow geographic and thematic focus. I

cluster the concluding remarks into three leading scholarly and socio-political debates each closely intertwined with the research framework as outlined in this introductory chapter — the first remark relates to the discussion on political ecology of extraction and encroachment in an area of conflict; the second debate draws from and relates to the notion of conservation on war footing by national armed forces in actual areas of conflict and the final point of the conclusion carries forward the notion of everyday and the ordinary. Additionally I also provide three avenues for further research pertaining to borderlands, post-colonial democracy and gender.

Before turning to the **five** articles, in the next chapter I explain the methodological framework of this PhD by outlining the various research methods and approaches I used while conducting fieldwork at various scales. As the research for this PhD is based on a reflexive epistemology and relational ontology, I also reflect on the multiple challenges of ethnographic (field) research, and my own positionality within ‘the field’ and the overall research project.

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2 Methodology

2.1 Personal Intimacies of Conflict in the Everyday — Field Notes from Beyond the Chicken’s Neck

Vignette I

It was a late afternoon in the middle of May in 2016, humid yet pleasant, because it had been raining heavily. I was sitting with my friend J, after a day of fieldwork, in the canteen of an engineering college in the outskirts of Kokrajhar town. J is a Bodo and grew up in Udalguri district in BTAD at the height of the Bodoland movement from 1980s till 2003. After studying in Pondicherry and Mumbai, he returned to his homeland, in Kokrajhar to work as a professor. This canteen is run by a group of local Bodo women. We sat there, chatting leisurely. As usual we discussed the political situation of the town and the upcoming elections to the Assam State Assembly and the possibility of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coming to power in the state and its alliance with the local Bodoland People’s Party (BPF). J, being the chief hostel warden of the men’s hostel, he always has a lot of stories to narrate like the ongoing student strike at the engineering college, and how the blue whale game had found its way into the campus (one of the students was found with a tattoo of a whale on his arms). As we continued speaking, suddenly we heard a really loud noise, which interrupted our conversation. It startled us all for a few moments and then as the activities at the canteen resumed, I turned to J and asked, “what do you think that was?”, J who is usually calm and unperturbed by such incidents said in his characteristic humorous tone, “Look, this is Bodoland. When you hear a noise here it can only be two things— a bomb blast or an earthquake...” and we both broke into laughter.

That is when I recalled a related incident, which happened a year ago, at a local market next to the engineering college, which centered on the possibility of an actual explosion. During my fieldwork I usually alternate between staying with my host family in Kokrajhar town and the guesthouse of the engineering college. Last year during my research visit, I was staying at the latter place and I was taking a break from field visits to do some writing. I suddenly got a call from J, asking whether I was at the market and he was relieved to know that I was not at the site where a few minutes ago, two men on a motorbike threw a hand-made grenade into a shop and sped away. The shopkeeper not knowing what to do picked it up and threw it into a neighboring shop. Subsequently, it was

kicked out onto the main road. It was then that the police intervened and the bomb squad carried it away to be detonated later. After a few hours, I heard a loud explosion and over dinner, J told me that it was the bomb being defused.

Vignette II

In February 2015, during the early days of my fieldwork, after a long day at the reserved forest in Saralpara (RF), my research assistant, R, a local Bodo person recommended we go to this famous joint called Hanuman Mistanna Bhandar or HMB for the best *chai* (tea) and *singara* (samosa) in town. HMB is situated in the main town square of Kokrajhar, across the road from the local police station. It is a family owned business and managed by two *Marwari*¹ brothers. We went in and R ordered for special *chai* and *samosas*. As I was sipping my tea, R revealed to me that the owner of HMB was shot dead at point blank range on a busy afternoon, by suspected NDFB militants a few years ago.

Vignette III

Muslim Student Leader Lafiqul Islam Ahmed Shot Dead in Assam

Kokrajhar, Assam: Lafiqul Islam Ahmed, a well-known minority students' leader in Assam, was shot dead by unidentified gunmen on August 1 in the violence-torn Kokrajhar district. Ahmed, 30, was the president of All Bodoland Minority Students' Union (ABMSU), a powerful students' body in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD)" (The Wire 2017).

This is how events unfolded before me when I arrived for my final round of fieldwork in August 2017. Lafiqul was one of my interlocutors who helped me connect with several other local politicians and student leaders. We were regularly in touch on social media and had written to each other only a week before he was brutally killed. We had planned to meet each other again in a couple of weeks for lunch at his home.

2.2 The Landscape and I: Context and Description of the Setting

I want to start with a confession: my research is the product of circumstance, of serendipity and co-incidence, of contingency, of interpretations and being interpreted (Wilkinson 2008:47).

The vignettes above trace the trajectory of my fieldwork over the years where episodes of violence, instability and terror are embedded in the everyday social and political structures. During the course

¹ An ethnic minority community living in BTAD. They are not STs.

of my ethnographic fieldwork, a total of twelve months, spanning from May 2014 to October 2017, BTAD witnessed two episodes of (large-scale) violence on ethno-religious lines, two incidents of massive flooding and occasional earthquakes. The physical and psychological scars and destruction of infrastructure and lives were ever visible on the landscape. Thus, my fieldwork, which was geared towards understanding of the conflict landscape of BTAD, was timely to say the least. Moreover when one lives, works and researches a conflict setting, such stories and sites are all too common, and I could have been able to draw similar ones from Kashmir, *naxal* affected areas of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal in the Indian context and during the civil war in Nepal or the LTTE war in Sri Lanka in the larger South Asian context. As Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius Robben (1995) note, in what is one of the most significant edited volumes on conducting ethnography in conflict contexts: *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Stories of Violence and Survival*, these incidents or stories evoke everyday experiences of violence in its myriad manifestations, in the context of northeast India and BTAD, ranging from rape to (sometimes violent) contestations surrounding rumors of violence, from moral dimensions of conflict to incidents of tragic brutalities. My focus in this PhD thesis has been this experiential dimension of conflict; the ways and strategies people use to live their lives in contexts marked by inescapable forms of violence.

As discussed in the introduction, I locate my PhD dissertation at the intersection of critical approaches to conflict studies, political ecology of extraction and livelihoods within additional layers of legal geography and notions of the everyday. In this methodology chapter, I begin by discussing the methodological framework that is based on insights from this literature. Thereafter, I draw on the larger corpus of anthropological work on conflict ethnography and the ethical challenges such research posits. I situate this further within the insider-outsider debate while critically reflecting on conducting field research in a conflict area not too far from ‘home’ and my positionality as a researcher ‘in the field’ and in the overall research project.

It is worth mentioning that in this period of twelve months, I conducted fieldwork across Kokrajhar district mainly focusing on the villages inside the RF of Chirang-Ripchu and Ultapaani (see map) as well as several temporary relief camps set up both inside and outside the RFs after the clashes between Bodos and Muslims in May 2014 and Bodos and Adivasis in December 2014. Beside the RFs, Misalmaari², a Muslim village, about twenty kilometers from Kokrajhar town, where five persons were killed and the entire village was charred to ashes during an episode of conflict in 2012 between the Bodos and Muslims, was also my fieldwork site. Working in a highly ethnically segregated society like the BTAD, requires that I take into account the narratives that cut across and through ethnic lines. This made my ethnographic approach multi-sited, largely because my focus

² All names, including names of villages and people are pseudonyms (with the exception of Kokrajhar and the forest ranges)

is as much on a geographical place as on people who are from different ethnic groups. Especially since villages and post conflict relief camps in BTAD are highly segregated on ethnic lines.

Marcus (1998) argues that it is generally a method of data collection that follows a topic or a social problem through different field sites geographically and/or socially. Multi-sited ethnography allows researchers to embrace multiplicity of perceptions involved within a specific idea or process. He further notes that multi-sited ethnography provides a more complex understanding of a topic since it allows a researcher to trace populations, ideas, and material objects through time and space. Important to this discussion is the very notion of the field itself, which James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (1997) strove to scrutinize, problematize and reflect on in their collection of essays called *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. One of the major reasons that resulted in this deliberation leaped out of the concern “about the lack of fit between the problems raised by a mobile, changing, globalizing world, on the one hand, and the resources provided by a method originally developed for studying supposedly small-scale societies, on the other” (ibid. 1997: 3). These discussions had begun to surface in anthropological circles for some time and needed to be addressed. In the collection of essays, some of the authors investigate how “the field” itself became part of the commonsense and professional practice of anthropology, and they look at this development “in the contexts both of wider social and political developments and of the academy’s micro politics” (ibid.: 4). Some others, whose own work stretches the conventional boundaries of what had so far been constituted as fieldwork, reflected on how the idea of the field has bounded and normalized the practice of anthropology by enabling certain kinds of knowledge while blocking off others and on a similar vein authorizing some objects of study and methods of analysis while being exclusionary of others. The purpose of this monumental volume was to interrogate the idea of ‘the field’ and critically reflect on how it helps to “define and patrol the boundaries of what is often knowingly referred to as ‘real anthropology’” (ibid. 1997: 6).

My desire to accomplish the above, resulted in choosing my interlocutors not only across ethnic groups but also those belonging to different social, economic and political classes and statures within those groups, i.e. ranging from those living in relief camps in extreme poverty to local political leaders dwelling in mansion like houses. I also supplemented these interviews by speaking with academics and policy experts on the region who resided outside of the BTAD in Guwahati and New Delhi.

I mentioned my ethnography as multi-sited. I should clarify that sites in this case are not always places but also positions. To comprehend differential perspectives on the issue of violent conflict, extraction and gauge the notion of everyday, I chose diverse fields and positions of people. Conducting fieldwork with the three major ethnic groups in the BTAD soon revealed that contrary to media reporting and academic analysis, it is not all Bodos who have gained both politically and

socially in stature after the creation of the BTAD. Moreover it was not a set of clearly defined opposing principles or issues that governed the assumed dominant notion of Bodos annihilating non-Bodos in the region. The majority of the Bodos have also been victims to episodes of violent clashes with retaliation by the Muslims and Adivasis. Of course, one can always argue in terms of the degree and scale of suffering based on the number of lives lost, villages burnt and people displaced from these various ethnic groups. In which case, the Adivasis come off as one of the most vulnerable groups within this conflict, as opposed to their Bodo and Muslim counterparts. Therefore, my attempt throughout this ethnography has been to be as neutral as possible in order to present a nuanced and realistic picture of this complex landscape.

2.3 Weaving Ethnography — Political Ecology and Conflict Studies in a Fragile Context

The discipline of conflict studies, in particular the stream focusing on the political economy of ‘violent conflict’ (Cramer 2002, 2006; Kalyvas 2006; Richards 2006; Korf 2004) and the political ecology literature focusing on the political economy of conservation encompassing within it the discussions on ‘resource wars’, are arenas to which both fields of inquiry form similar critiques (Le Billon 2001; Peluso and Watts 2001; Cramer 2006; Cuvelier et al. 2014). The larger body of literature around what has come to be known as ‘resource wars’ exists out of two main ‘hypotheses’. The first, spearheaded by Paul Collier, is the idea that ‘greed’ drives violent conflict, arguing specifically that (potential) rebels are driven by greed. Easily exploitable and abundant resources present a ‘window of opportunity’ to start looting them through the barrel of a gun (Collier 2000). The second hypothesis proposed by Hommer-Dixon (1999) notes that on the contrary, it is not abundance rather scarcity that initiates conflict. This proposition goes beyond the notion of greed to argue that scarcity compels people to fight for ‘their piece of the cake’. Focusing especially on renewable resources such as arable farmland, it is understood from a Malthusian standpoint that when populations are expanding, pressure on these resources invariably intensifies, leading to aggravation of tensions among and within the population, explaining the eventual outbreak of violence (Hommer-Dixon 1999). While these two notions of ‘resource wars’ differ considerably, they are both grounded on economic and rational logic of reasoning. Nevertheless, both notions have been subject to severe criticism by both the scholars of conflict studies and political ecology, who outright reject this framing of emergence of violent conflict through a rational choice approach and economical rationalization.

According to Cramer (2002), Collier’s greed thesis is based on rather thin data generated by establishing proxy indicators for greed and grievances. This clearly negates the role and existence

of social and political grievances as motivations of (future) violence by rebels. Moreover, Collier and Hoeffler only consider “objective grievances” (Collier and Hoeffler 2004: 570). However, from an ontological perspective it is clear that social problems cannot be adequately mirrored through raw quantitative data, rather has to be estimated by qualitative research and ethnographic methods. Especially Collier and Hoeffler’s cross-country study approach can be seen as the very reason, why their grievance proxies do not show any significance.

Political ecology thus also focuses on the relation between natural resources (management) and violent conflict, and advanced approaches that go beyond the idea of the resource ‘curse’. Consequently, political ecology emphasizes on “the means by which control and access of resources and property rights are defined, negotiated and contested within the political arenas of the household, the workplace, and the state” (Peet and Watts 1996: 239). Contrary to the rational choice approach to analyzing conflict, scholars of political ecology and conflict studies use a more situational approach guided more by social, political and cultural factors focusing on the entrenchment of multiple actors within the political economy of war (Korf 2004; Peluso and Watts 2001). Having said this, given the multi-disciplinary approach of political ecology as a field, what it does not do is resort to a purely ethnographic approach towards field research. In the process of engaging and investigating the roles of the multiple actors embedded in differential forms of power relations, political ecological approaches tend to ignore the notions of everyday that are an integral process of these relationships especially in a conflict setting.

In the context of this thesis which studies the RFs and the populations inhabiting it in all its manifestations and forms of power relations, the expansion of a political ecological framework that encompasses within it the relational aspects of law and space as formulated within legal geography assumes momentousness. In keeping with this view, as Bennett and Layard (2015) note, ethnography is one of legal geography’s most favored methodologies. Such an approach within legal geography is used to depict how analysis working in that vein builds up a site and situation’s story working upward and outward from the local, moving towards more abstract shaping forces and delineating their actual localized effects. Such site-focused ethnographically inclined studies especially in the contexts of political forests also often adhere attention to the materiality of law, exhibiting how its existence is contained not just within inanimate objects (documents, buildings, street layouts and signs, habitats and creatures) but also people residing on these sites, and beyond.

I have made an attempt to root my methods within critical conflict studies, which in my case relates to working an unstable and highly volatile political situation characterized by a “precarious security of most residents, the general unpredictability of the events and the traumatization through violence of combatants and civilians” (Wood 2006: 373). While, carrying out ethnography in exotic contexts may be deemed as having a holiday of sorts (Vandekerckhove 2010), in violent

political landscapes the reality is quite different. Even one of the basic techniques of ethnography like simply hanging around with the locals—which is a popular misconception about ethnography to begin with—is also a challenging task. Therefore, as an ethnographer to make sense of such a complex situation, which the violence unfurls, given the fact that “violence itself is confusing and inconclusive”(Nordstrom and Robben 1995: 3), is even more daunting. The emotional intensity of these events and the people who are being studied coupled with the arbitrariness of the circumstances under which fieldwork is conducted, entwines ethnography and fieldwork (Nordstrom 1997). This relates to Michael Taussig’s (1987) notion of violence as being slippery and that, which escapes an easy definition and yet enters the most fundamental features of people’s lives. Given this messy base associated in defining what constitutes violence, scholars studying conflict like Nordstrom and Robben (1995), or Feldman (1991) have refused to provide any overarching theory of violence. As Nordstrom and Robben (1995) note violence is an intricately layered phenomenon with each victim, participant and perpetrator bringing in their own perspective. For Feldman (1991), theory emerges from experience.

The researcher has to navigate amongst the numerous realities she is presented with ranging from the political reality consisting of doctrines and deeds as well as behind closed doors maneuverings of entrepreneurs of power and conflict; the military reality which could consist of strategies and tactics of soldiers and police personnel. Then there are intellectual realities forged in cafes and halls of academia as well as the policy and journalistic domain of natter and tales from the frontline. Also present is the psychological reality of fear, terror and uncertainty among the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Finally, there exists the reality of life within these volatile contexts consisting of stories of casualties and the varied actors involved within this landscape of terror.

For most scholars working on situations of war and violent conflict, like Green (1999), Feldman (1991), Nordstrom (1997), Sluka (1995) the most pressing reality amongst those stated above is ethnography of sociopolitical violence centered on civilian populations, social processes and cultural life. Conducting fieldwork in such spheres invariably necessitates the assurance of full anonymity of interlocutors, the creation of pseudonyms for places and persons and careful storage of field notes are standard practices for the ethnographer, to avoid additional security risks for all parties involved. However, it is often the social and political circumstances in the ground to go beyond the traditional ideas in ethnographic research. While a political ethnography of conflict requires one “to look microscopically at the foundations of political institutions and their attendant set of practices” (Auyero 2006: 258), in some situations due to frequent spurts of violence, renders an empirical study that embraces, “close association with, and often participation in this setting”, unfeasible. For example, in her work *A Different Kind of War Story*, Nordstrom (1997: 78), concedes to shift her initial focus from ethnography of place to one that embraces topic and process in order to keep

up with the rapidly altering political context. As regard to my own fieldwork, the fragile political context along with natural disasters like flood in western Assam shaped my research choices and design in several ways, which I discuss below. Such a methodological approach is what I applied during my fieldwork, which helped in going beyond the complex nature-society relationship but also understanding how the various actors navigate through these fragile terrains of uncertainty.

2.4 Living with the Rich while Researching the Poor — Traversing through Challenging Terrains: the Insider-Outsider Conundrum

“You might be an Indian citizen with an Indian passport and by that logic, in principle you could go³ anywhere however you could still be picked up and questioned about your research on the pretext of national security”.

Accessibility always poses as an issue while doing ethnography in remote rural areas (see Vandekerckhove 2010), yet in tenuous political settings like that of Assam, accessibility has to be understood in terms of security. First off, I would have liked to live inside these RFs either in a forest guesthouse or with a host family. However, all the forest guesthouses had been taken over by the Army and paramilitary and converted into military bases. The attack on Adivasis by the NDFB rebels in December 2014 led to about fifty casualties including eighteen children and close to 300,000 Bodos and Adivasis getting displaced. This created an aura of fear and uncertainty all around and when I visited BTAD in January 2015, the villagers were not comfortable hosting me especially in these remote rural areas as that posited a threat to both their and my own safety. So, I ended up being hosted by a friend who ran a local NGO, but that entailed mostly visiting those sites where this NGO was working and it was difficult to detach myself from the politics therein. After accepting their hospitality for about a month, I moved into the home of a local Bodo government officer that was arranged by an acquaintance. When I first arrived, I was startled to find that it was almost a huge mansion and I was given a whole floor with five bedrooms and three toilets for my own use. This came with several people working in the house – a cook, a cleaner, someone that did the washing and several others I saw running chores from time to time. I soon found out that this was the home of a high-level officer who came from one of the most influential Bodo families in the region. His brother was a local lawmaker. They were often referred to as the royal family of BTAD. My host family was extremely kind to me and I tried my best to refrain from having any political conversations with them. My hosts, who I will refer to as Uncle and Aunty, however seemed a little

³ In conversation with the Major and Colonial of the Indian Army posted in the BTAD, during my fieldwork on 2nd April 2016

concerned about my going to interior villages in the RFs, but they soon realized there was not much he could do to stop me. I was always asked to be careful and at least keep them informed of my movements and if possible return home latest by twenty-one hours.

I struggled to come to terms with the ethical dilemmas that came with navigating between these two worlds—one of this affluent lives being led by Bodo elites, where for each meal they had fish and pork curries, their children were sent out of the state to expensive boarding schools and each year they travelled abroad for holidays—and that of my interlocutors in the RFs and outside whose houses had been charred to dust, the relief ration often not arriving on time, their hungry children whose scars from the conflict were still healing, with no access to water, sanitation or health facilities. From being extremely grateful for a cup of salted tea without milk in a relief camp to relishing wild venison meat (which is illegal), a gift from Aunty's colleague, on the same day only added fuel to this predicament. Of course, the focus of this PhD is not to understand the place and relationship of these elites in the society or their experiences of conflict which did not affect them or their families in any direct manner, but in the process of staying with my host family I did learn a lot about the lives of Bodo elites and how buffered they tend to be from the externalities of recurring conflict and suffering. This also goes on to show how only a handful of politicians and elites in the Bodo society have benefitted from the creation of BTAD and recurring conflict, and that this does not in any way trickle down to the larger Bodo society.

At this junction I ought to mention that in the discipline of anthropology, from which I liberally draw throughout the PhD dissertation, has a long history of addressing what we should do when we research less powerful or subordinate groups. Therefore the literature on studying elites is small especially in anthropology and most of the work has been done in the discipline of Political Science (Hughes and Cormode, 1998). Good fieldwork, and production of decent ethnographic texts, should be embedded in some kind of empathy, or even solidarity, with the groups we study. This is because these groups are considered to be subaltern in some way (Sampson 2013). The quest for scientific data should yield to the needs and sensitivity of the groups we study, so in my case, my solidarity should obviously rest with the vulnerable communities living in the remote rural spaces, while also being grateful to my elite Uncle and Aunty. To use Graeber's (2011) terminology: we have a debt. In the course of my interaction with my generous host family, I arrived at two possible ways of dealing with this – that the ethical obligation which emerges from whether living or working with elites in the course of fieldwork should not be any different from the standard set of ethics in researching any other group of people. They should also be treated with empathy and respect and that I make an attempt to try to understand their world and in the process argue that their *Weltanschauung* is in fact the most pragmatic alternative available to them in the context of the fragile society they live in. The second approach resonates more with Shurmer-Smith's (1998) work with the Indian Administrative

Services (IAS) where she discusses concerns related to the occasional unexpected ways in which she connected with the elites whose practices she was critically researching. In so doing, she challenged the notion that it might be less problematical for the ethnographer to critique the powerful than to generate research on the comparatively powerless. This also feeds into the notion of power, for the elites have power and the objective of the anthropological project is to reveal, to lay bare how power operates. That revealing power may conflict with the ethical imperatives of research itself. In my case, staying with my powerful host family entailed that I was often told about how corrupt my host Uncle is (or other such details about his family I choose not to reveal here) by my local friends and acquaintances.

The ethics of anthropological fieldwork requires to have a special relationship with research object (in our case, people in their daily lives), connected to this is the ethics of disseminating knowledge about how people pursue their agendas. This always presents the risk that these people with whom the researcher shared a relationship of trust could regard the latter of betraying that trust. This makes social science, and particularly anthropology that relies on a personal relationship with informants, vulnerable.

So, in my case I decided to treat my host family with respect and not let their world views get in the way of my work with those affected by recurring conflict. Staying with an influential family also came with benefits, like it was much easier for me to have access to other governmental and state officials. I confess to having exploited my host family's networks for access to exclusive interviews or documents that helped my research. Given that my host family was also politically aligned with a certain local party, during elections it posed to be a problem, especially when I was openly accused of supporting a particular political party. This is when I decided to move to the guesthouse of an engineering college, facilitated by my friend J. This was also the time when I needed to be detached from them. Robben (1995) states that ethnographic understanding through empathy and detachment has been generally accepted as a common dialectic in fieldwork. Although we should build a good rapport with the people we study and live with in the process of our fieldwork to grasp the world from their perspective, a simultaneous reflective detachment as observers is also necessary to objectify our perceptions and enhance our analytical insight. I should add that I still continue to share a good relationship with my host family and I am extremely grateful to them for all the support and in this dissertation I have chosen to not be overtly critical of the way they live and view those around them. Rather, I use my association with them as an opportunity that was presented to me to reflect about the intricacies and contradictions of a social process through which I found myself caught up in practices, which I neither fully perceive, understand, nor control (see Radway 1989). Since, this PhD thesis's goal is not to study elites, rather engaging with them in the process of using a snowball sampling technique among other ethnographic methods, I have not employed

the dominant conceptual tool of ‘studying up’ as that is beyond the focus of this PhD.

2.5 “Why are you going to these Bodo villages? They have weapons in every house and they burnt our villages and killed our sons” — Research Site(s), Restrictions on Access and the Everyday

As already mentioned it was important for me to traverse across ethnic lines in order to build trust and make a space for myself within all the three major ethnic groups. Selection of villages was not an easy task, especially given the fact that due to recurring episodes of conflict people continued to move in and out of relief camps. In my second visit to the field in January 2015, right after an episode of conflict in 2014, the villages I had visited in 2014 had been burnt and the population displaced. My selection strategy was guided by three factors, namely, ethnic composition, accessibility in terms of geographical terrain (I was not able to visit certain areas in summer due to floods and erosion) and incidence of violence. Usually a relief camp was set up with populations from four to five villages and not all the families returned to their villages at the same time. Tracing my interlocutors from the relief camp(s) back to the villages was not an easy task. I began by visiting relief camps and villages on the basis of incidence of violence, i.e. a village that had been witness to at least one episode of ethnic violence since 1996. I then selected similar villages based on ethnic composition (since over the years villages have remained ethnically segregated owing to ethnic strife). Eventually I was able to narrow down to one Muslim village, a Bodo village that I traced from the relief camp to when they were back in their original village and an Adivasi relief camp that I visited several times in 2015 and 2016, and later followed a few families from the camp to back to their villages which was nearby. So, this selection was in no way linear processes and necessitated a lot of back and forth on my part. However, by my third visit to the field in 2016, I had managed to narrow down on the villages and the families I worked with till the end of my fieldwork. This was also due to the much-needed assistance from gatekeepers who were influential, well known and respected within the respective communities. They mostly consisted of local student leaders, teachers of local schools and NGO workers.

Given the complex conflict context, I also had to pay special attention to my own safety as a researcher. This was also due to the fact that to some extent I preferred to be more adventurous and chose to work in remote villages instead of those closer to the town. This also entailed that I inform the local police since kidnapping by insurgents was a common phenomenon. The head of the Department of Police for BTAD was extremely supportive but insisted that he provides me with a few police personnel to accompany me to these remote villages. This put me in a difficult situation but I firmly turned down his request. To this he insisted that I keep him posted regarding

my whereabouts. In terms of key safety strategies, being alert, maintaining confidentiality and data safety, contextualizing research, and communicating well about my role and objective as a researcher were important in building trust, along with listening to the advice of my gatekeepers, host families and local people in planning everyday fieldwork. Understanding local and national political dynamics and patterns of conflict (Goodhand 2000) was also important in avoiding potential risk.

Of course there were situations where I did not manage too well with potential risks and I describe one such incident pertaining to my research assistant below.

The rapport-building process in ethnography usually follows the stages of apprehension–exploration–cooperation–participation (Bohannon cited in Spradley 1979: 79). In my fieldwork the process did progress according to the stages described. In the beginning, there was apprehension about the purpose of these regular visits and uncertainty about the types of questions I was going to ask. It could also be termed as the liminal phase of embarking on the fieldwork ritual (Ellen 1993). This phase was expected due to my being a researcher from a foreign university, the prevailing conflict context and the cultural differences and existing power relations among the different ethnic groups. To illustrate this, while most respondents were willing to have conversations and reached the level of ‘co-operation’ (Spradley 1979), there were also a few who did not overcome it and expressed their apprehension of me being an undercover journalist, or some kind of informer. Also the Muslim communities usually were more suspicious than the Bodos. This also owes to the history of conflict in the region where the Muslims have burnt the blame of infiltrating on land belonging to Bodos and indigenous Assamese. I tried to address this by reiterating that they could withdraw from the conversation at any point (since I did not take notes or record any of these interviews owing to the sensitive nature of information being discussed) and could ask for clarifications and explanations. This assurance, about which I was sincere, mostly worked in making them feel comfortable and in gaining trust.

At this juncture, I should also mention that since I worked with three different ethnic groups that were often hostile to each other, I had to rely on respective ethnic networks to get into the communities. This was done through local NGOs that worked with these communities, student leaders of the communities and since most local NGOs employed people from across the communities, these employees also helped me get access to the communities. Since I had to constantly navigate across these ethnically different communities, I let my research participants know that I was talking and mixing with people across ethnic groups. I explained to my gatekeepers and respondents within these networks why my research topic required me to carry out fieldwork across these communities and at various institutions. I explained to reassure them, so that they did not feel vulnerable sharing information with me, or feel suspicious towards me for navigating not only among the ethnic groups

but also state institutions as well as the police and armed forces. From a methodological perspective, the behavior, actions and responses of people needed to be understood in the historical and political context of war and internal conflict. Keeping a low profile and ‘minding your own business’ is often considered to be a survival strategy in conflict areas (Goodhand 2000). Moreover, categories, such as victims–perpetrators, dominant–dominated and powerful–subordinated, are often not distinct in conflict areas. People’s memories and experiences suggest violence is not only embedded in state practices within these societies I worked in or directed by one community against another. Rather violence as well as the probability of violence shapes villagers’ actions in myriad ways. There is a sense of unity among people across communities for the collective memory of having faced ethnically induced episodes of violence.

These everyday forms of fieldwork encounters to a large extent also shaped my own embodied identity. My own everyday within the fieldwork consisted in navigating across ethnic, institutional and class boundaries on a single day. On some days I started with a visit to the local political party office or the office of the forest officer followed by visits to a Muslim and Adivasi village, respectively. I had to be constantly aware that the conditions under which I was conducting fieldwork were ‘disturbed’ especially since the ‘political’ was not only clearly marked but became implicit in my movements due to the very nature of my research. (Longkumar 2009). I had to be aware that I did not consciously or unconsciously carry over my personal feelings attached to narratives of violence and suffering from one village to another. For example, if my first visit was to a Muslim village where I was being narrated to about the ‘evil’ Bodos, I made sure that if the following village was a Bodo village I did not let my previous encounters seep in anyway into my conversations. This obviously took sometime since passion ran deep in these interviews and being trained as a professional social worker I usually practiced empathy rather than sympathy. What also helped were conversations with my friends and research assistants at the end of the day. However, what I also realized upon much reflection was how getting involved in the field and listening to people’s stories of atrocities, could make empathy turn into identification (Nordstrom and Robben 1995:14). The more I reflected upon these, the more I realized that the nuances of the interactions that occurred in the fieldwork depended on the subtlety of one’s own identity, that is, how one’s position is constructed when viewed as a native or foreigner researcher. Often on the same day I would have to work through different identities while being aware of my self-identity. I discuss the issue of positionality in the subsequent sections.

2.6 “So you are an Assamese? Or Bengali? Are you a Bangladeshi?”— In pursuit of my positionality while doing ethnography at home, or is it home?

Undoubtedly my personal ontological and epistemological position influenced this research project from its inception to the end, making it important to be reflective on the choices that I have made during the research (Bourdieu 2004). While in the field, my identity could be constructed as that of both an outsider and an insider due to my ethnic background. Although the area of study is a part of Assam, my language and culture rendered me as an outsider there (although I spoke languages that could be easily used for conversing with my respondents). Nonetheless being an insider-outsider also created difficulties (Mookherjee 2001) so I tried my best to be accepted by the community so that they would trust me. Born and raised in Assam by (Hindu) Bengali parents of East Pakistani origin, I am fluent in Bengali (including its various dialects like *Sylheti*, *Dhakaya* and *Borishal*), Assamese and Hindi. My association with BTAD goes back to the year 2009 when I spent over a month conducting fieldwork on IDPs for a master’s degree in Social Work. Moreover, several of my Bodo peers from the university where I got my Master’s degree have returned to BTAD and now run NGOs or work in the academic institutions that have come up over the years.

Therefore, I had a wide network of people and the requisite language skills benefited my ethnography. While interacting with the Bodos, I was a Bengali who spoke Assamese and this worked in my favor since politically it was the dominant Assamese that the Bodos were at loggerheads with. With my Muslim interlocutors I spoke in various dialects of Bengali and also shared a common trajectory in terms of my grandparents who immigrated to Barak Valley in 1949 after India became independent. In case of the Adivasis, I interacted in Assamese and Hindi. I had to practice the skills of maneuvering my language and identity according to whom I was interacting with.

Shao (2013) points out that trust is very important while conducting sensitive research even though it takes place in the researcher’s own country. Given that I was conducting interviews on topics that were extremely sensitive and the information that I received was also often confidential (while conducting ethnography with timber smugglers and Army personnel), the circumstances did not allow me to even carry a notebook. I shifted my approach to one using participant observation and informal conversations. However, participant observation in conflict areas must transcend its traditional approaches. As Robben (1995: 84) points out, an anthropologist who wishes to understand a major armed conflict from the perspective of its principal protagonists cannot resort to participant observation in its traditional sense but is restricted to account interviews.

I took long walks with villagers affected by conflict who lived in temporary relief camps to their villages, paddy fields and former village markets and back to the relief camps, to be confronted with

the charred remains and stories about how life was before the attack. This in some ways relates to what has now emerged in anthropology as the method known as walking ethnography —the practice of conducting ethnographic research on foot. Unlike ethnography undertaken at established sites, the practice of walking the talking enables chance encounters with myriad objects, people and spaces unpremeditated at the inception of the research. As Tim Edensor argues, walking exposes rhythms that intersect, ‘adding to the complex polyrhythmy of place’ (Edensor 2010: 12). A mobile sense of place can be produced (and identified) ‘through longer immersion by the walking body across a more extended space’ (ibid.: 13). In their introduction to a collection on walking ethnography titled *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*, Ingold and Vergunst reason, ‘It is along the ground, and not in some ethereal realm of discursively constructed significance, over and above the material world, that lives are paced out in their mutual relations’ (Ingold and Vergunst 2008: 14). As Yi’En Cheng further notes, the custom of walking itself is a ‘mobile and embodied practice’ and ‘inherently a rhythmic experience and potentially offer[s] insights to the multiple splices of time-space narratives’ (Cheng 2014: 15). Thus walking emphasizes relational moments of ethnographic practice in ways that are difficult to generate using other forms of mobility. It is also a multi-sensory practice and ‘brings to the fore the interrelatedness of the visual and the other senses’ (2014: 16). Therefore, by walking both with and without my interlocutors, inside and outside of the RF, inside villages and even in the town of Kokrajhar, I placed specific importance on the found, the discovered and the inadvertent. It also provided me with a sense of how people and matter move through the same landscapes as well as opportunities for conversations with locals in the RF.

This exercise was supplemented with the more traditional method of sitting down and engaging in (in) formal conversations over tea and *paan*.

My research assistant(s) and me would sit around and converse for hours and at the end of the day rush to the car or motorbike and note down the main remarks and key observations on core themes and issues. However, most of these informal chats were supplemented with more detailed interviews with the forest officers, the officers of the Indian/Assam Administrative Services (IAS) and Indian/Assam Police Services (IPS), NGO professionals and aid workers, local leaders belonging to different political parties and officers of the paramilitary forces. I also spent a lot of time at the office of the local newspaper, hanging out with local journalists, which also was extremely informative especially while faced with a society— in— flux. This also helped in dealing with rumours which Nordstrom and Robben (1995) consider one of the most common and complicated problems of fieldwork in conflict settings, under rapidly changing circumstances.

In conducting (in) formal interviews I attempted an approach applied by some feminist scholars, that of being collaborative, interactive, non-hierarchical, reflective, responsive, sensitive and bottom up instead of top down (Laslett and Rapport 1975; Oakley 1981, Parr 1998). Unstructured, informal

interviews are useful in an ethnographic study as they help the researcher understand what people think and how one person's beliefs and perceptions contrasts with another's (Fetterman 1998: 129 and Kvale 2006). Since memory is not unmediated, conversations necessitated enhanced attention in relation to time, space, socio-political reality and the nature of experience, all of which affect in varying degrees the perceptions of the past. Traumatic experience, fear of reprisal, a desire to protect self and family and a sense of insecurity may lead someone to deliberately conceal some facts or express them in a different way (Bell 1998). Remembering and recounting violent events of loss, abduction and torture can be traumatic and terrorising, both when the wounds are fresh (in case of the December 2014 conflict) as well as when the memory is stale (the conflicts on 1998, 1999 and 2012). Lapse of time is sometime responsible for memory loss and the distortion of the facts. Moreover memory is not the only factor that influences the contour of the narratives. The intimate nature of the 'interlocutor's encounters with violence often results in identity dislocation (Bouka 2013). The power of trauma has the capacity to disorient the survivor and make her lose her bearings and points of reference. Consequently, I had to accept and embrace the vagueness of facts as was recounted to me by my respondents. I soon realized that the value of data does not dwell in its factual accuracy. It rests on discerning the range of individual narrative strategies and unfolding how people present their experiences within a specific context (Holstein and Gubrium 2005; Linde 1993; Bouka 2013). Therefore in the end, for example, the value of Malati's account does not rest on whether the militants shot them on a cold December evening or if her brother was the only one who was shot at. The intrinsic value in terms of my research on Malati's lived experiences of violence rested in how she recollected her personal truth and the associations she made between the events of that day and her current situation.

Thomson, Ansom and Murison (2013) note that it is the silent stories at the war's epicentre, which are generally the most authentic. Using (participatory) observation, I paid due attention to the use of symbols, verbal and non-verbal expressions, special body language, silence and the sequence of narration, all of which provide deeper insight into the personal experience of the participant (Parr 1998). Yet another research tool, which proved to be very helpful, was Focused Group Discussions (FGD). I carried out several FGD in Misalmaari and within the RFs in Lung Sung and Saralpara as well as in the relief camps. In Misalmaari the discussions revolved around recounting the violence of 2012, returning back to the village and building of lives. We also discussed elections and the conflict of December 2014. In the relief camp the topic was again centred on violence as well as feelings of fear and anxiety that came with the experiences of residing in a relief camp and the uncertain political context. The process required me to be extremely self aware and reflexive while asking survivors of violence to recount their own stories, keeping in mind the point made by Olujic (1995) that we should be careful when we are unable to relieve their traumas and cannot restore

their lives. Indeed as Veena Das (1990) had found in course of her work on the anti-Sikh riots in India and the same was in my case as well, that people often felt the need to just speak about the events. In the RFs, the topics centred more on processes of land encroachment, negotiation with the forest department and other land-related matters ranging from land disputes to mortgage issues etc. In the context of the FGD in Misalmaari, it was interesting to observe that men and women helped one another to recall events, corrected others where it was needed and in this way weaved a collective memory. They contested, confronted and acknowledged each other's memories.

I eventually found that the narrative analysis method worked well while recounting their stories. I highlighted the context of narration and the role of the listener in the construction of these accounts as highlighted by scholars (Bernstein 1997 ; Gubrium and Holstein 1998; Holmes 1998; Mishler 1986). To expand this further, using *narrative as method* implies a general approach that views the individual within their social environments as actively conferring meaning onto objects in the world, including others and onto themselves; the way this occurs in everyday conditions, as well as in interviews and FGDs, is essentially subjective and interpretive. If narrative is elevated into "the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (Polkinghorne 1988: 1), then it makes sense to argue that the stories we tell are such because they reflect *the stories we are* (McAdams 1993; Randall 1995).

2.7 Risks and Ethics

*"What... you went to LungSung that too with your Bodo research assistant? Did he manage to come back alive?"*⁴

Mertus (2009) relates to researchers working in difficult terrains as often being self-sacrificing and even reckless. I have tried my best to uphold the imperative of do no harm to the local population including my research assistants and host family. However, less acknowledged in the literature is the responsibility of researchers to anticipate and counteract the potential harm to self. On one instance during the course of my twelve months of ethnography, I have been guilty to both the above. It was a result of me trying to push my boundaries and also wrong assessment of the political situation by my research assistant, R and me. I should mention that, so far I have worked with four research assistants and they have all been from the Bodo community. Given that the local administration including the police, forest guards are mostly Bodos, it only helped with the ethnographic process. Coming back to this incident, it was in February 2015, barely a month after the clashes between Bodos and Adivasis, we decided to go deep inside LungSung, which was affected by the conflict.

⁴ This is what my friend D asked me after my first visit to LungSung with my Bodo research assistant in February 2015. Lung Sung is primarily inhabited by Adivasis and after the clashes of December 2014, it was a no-go zone for the Bodos.

As we traversed the distance in R's old Alto through muddy unpaved roads, we noticed residuals of the conflict in form of charred villages that lined the fields. R is usually well dressed but on that day he wore rather a shabby t-shirt, a pair of ragged jeans and discoloured *chappals*. I soon understood why, as when we were about to reach the village, R directed me to tell the villagers that he was my driver. I must say I was puzzled but decided to do as R said. After we reached the village, I introduced myself and presented the reasons for my visit. The *gao bura* (village headmen) was called and began to recount the episode of violence, which occurred barely a month ago. Soon we shifted to a tea-stall where some of the local youths joined in the conversation. They took us to a nearby village where there were more relief camps set up told us about how they were neglected by the district administration and had not received relief aid. They also took us to a school, which they had constructed themselves through the help of the community. After spending about five hours in total, they asked us to leave when it was getting dark as we had a long way to go and there was no real road to Kokrajhar. However, as we were getting into the car, an Adivasi youth said to me, "how did you manage to get a Bodo into our area? Do you know even the chief of BTAD is scared to come here".

As we were driving back to Kokrajhar, that is when it dawned on me just how much of a risk both R and I had taken and that we should not have gone to LungSung on a whim, just the two of us. We eventually found out that just a week ago a Bodo youth was captured and beaten up in that village. R later recounted to me that they interrogated him while I was having tea with the headman and wanted to know what was he doing here with me. He explained to them that he was a driver by profession, based out of Kokrajhar and was just driving me to LungSung for some money. In real life, R has a master's degree and hails from an affluent Bodo family. So, when I shared this with my friend D who runs an NGO in BTAD, he introduced me to Satyanath, the district president of All Adivasi Students Union and since then I have travelled to LungSung and other Adivasi areas with Satyanath who eventually became a good friend.

Before, going further I should mention here the roles of my research assistants and also clarify the reasons as to why I worked with four research assistants in course of my fieldwork. As, already mentioned the Bodos continue to yield more political power in the region and have surfaced as a dominant ethnic group. Bodo individuals run most local NGOs, while almost all the local bureaucrats and law makers at the BTC are ethnic Bodo. Therefore, it made sense for me to have a Bodo research assistant. Moreover, since the terrain required for me to have a motorbike to travel in, the research assistant had to be a male. I first went to the field without a research assistant. A friend was supposed to help me with the fieldwork but a week before my fieldwork he got offered a position in Hyderabad and had to move. Once in the field through some of my existing contact I was introduced to R who was a recent graduate in folklore studies and had grown up in the region. R was looking for a job

and a common friend requested him to help me for two or three months. When I went back to the field in the following year, R had personal commitments and could not help me any more. Once again through a common friend I found another research assistant, I shall call him U, who happened to be a law student. U helped me for a few months and soon after I left, he got admission in Delhi University and moved to Delhi. So, once again I was left with no research assistant. During my final fieldwork, a friend who is also a local journalist asked one of his friends to help me with my fieldwork. This person, who I shall call K, worked as a journalist part time and so he often was not very regular with the fieldwork. After assisting me for about a month he realized that he was not able to give me enough time, so he asked G, a recent law graduate to help me. Thereafter G became my research assistant for the last months of fieldwork. Working with four research assistants over the course of four years was not easy since each time I had to build rapport, explain my research to them and of course I connected differently with the different assistants. However, since I spoke the languages and already had a network of people I knew due to my previous work in the region, I did not have to rely too much on the research assistant to know about the region or help me with contacts.

Given my work inside the RFs and Muslim villages, which continue to be extremely sensitive areas, I usually have to inform the local police of my presence in the region. I must say they have never been happy with the idea of me traversing these remote terrains, zones of counter insurgency, but over time I believe I have been able to gain trust of the villagers and village headmen as well as local student leaders of Bodo, Adivasi and Muslim communities. As Thomson, Ansoms and Murison (2013) note, research puts ethnographers in situations where they have to manage risks to minimise the chance of real danger, while at the same time dealing with the emotion it entails. I have tried to achieve this by forging good working relationship with forest rangers and guards as well as local student leaders who yield a lot of support in the community. As Meyer (2007) highlights, current research ethnics focuses on the risks to which interlocutors are exposed, while negating the risks encountered by the researcher herself. Sluka (1995: 277), reflecting on similar dilemmas denotes that to some extent, ‘dangers can be mediated through foresight, planning and skilful manoeuvre.’

Undeniably one of the most traumatizing experience for me was when one of my friends and interlocutors who helped with my access in the field over the years was shot dead a week before I were to meet him for a lunch cooked by his mother. It took me a long time to come to terms with the shock and distress this caused me. As Meyer (2007) observes, very little attention is given to the emotions of researchers in the set-up of a research project. After having witnessed suffering and abject forms of poverty, dejection and vulnerability that the conflict unleashes, from very close quarters, the death of a friend was extremely overwhelming to cope with. As Wood, notes, in

extreme cases these events have the potential to harm the researcher and evoke trauma (Wood 2006). In line with Thomson (2009), and with the support of friends, family and colleagues I have been able to acknowledge my personal emotions over time and have focused on self-protection.

The final conundrum is of trying to find the genre of ethnography into which this research methodology fits. As already mentioned I use a political ecology and economy approach and use qualitative methods mostly using ethnography. It would be wise to position this methodology within political ethnography in which case it is to be viewed as a broader framework of qualitative research that enables researchers to advance a better familiarity with processes of power and dynamics of conflict and the ways in which these curate everyday life of the forest dwellers and those affected by violent conflict. Thenceforth this research methodology can be described as a political ethnography, conclusively.

Going beyond finding a fit for my methodology, I have also argued for advancing the case of self-protection and ways to deal with complex emotions which fieldwork in such settings can evoke in the literature on methodology. I have also shown using my own experiential learning that achieving trust and transforming the researcher's identity from outsider to insider is not a one-sided effort and neither is it constant; it is a slow and placid process of cultural negotiation between both parties. While not directly speaking to the literature on studying up, I have highlighted the complexities that come with having a powerful and influential host family, which is also an issue less discussed in the larger body of methodological work.

2.8 References

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3 The Politics of Complexity in Bodoland: The Interplay of Contentious Politics, the Production of Collective Identities and Elections in Assam

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Abstract

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections witnessed a significant shift in the political spectrum of the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) in Assam, with non-Bodos voting en masse for an independent candidate, a former United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) militant who was backed by a collective of non-Bodo organisations. Using the elections as a focal point, this paper aims to explore the larger political dynamics, political mobilisation and shifting alliances within a framework of contentious politics and collective action that unfurled during the elections and eventually led to an episode of targeted violence against the Muslim community in BTAD.

Keywords: elections, collective action, political identity, contentious politics, mobilisation, ethnic violence, ethnic groups, BTAD, ULFA, Bodos, Muslims.

3.1 Introduction

‘Our candidate has won, but by too many votes’, said Ashrafuddin, a school teacher, describing independent candidate and former militant, Naba Kumar Sarania’s presumed landslide victory from Assam’s Kokrajhar constituency.... ‘People are happy, but nervous’. A fortnight ago, a senior leader from the Bodoland People’s Front, the political face of the former militant group called the Bodoland Liberation Tigers, blamed Assam’s Muslim population for the likely defeat of her party’s candidate in Kokrajhar. The very next day unidentified gunmen killed at least 45 Muslims.¹

¹ *Business Standard* (16 May 2014) [http://www.business-standard.com/article/elections-2014/in-assam-a-thumping-victory-means-more-uncertainty-114051601629_1.html, accessed 10 Nov. 2015].

The newspaper excerpt above speaks of the phenomenal victory of a reformed militant in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections² in the Bodo Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) in Assam. This win, as well as its aftermath, were both remarkable and historical. It was the result of a shift in political and ethnic alliances in an electorate in BTAD. For the first time since its creation, a non-Bodo candidate had emerged victorious in the Kokrajhar constituency. The victory was the outcome of both polarisation among the Bodos and the mobilisation of a heterogeneous group of non-Bodos, including minority Muslims. With as many as six candidates in the ring, the multi-cornered fight in Kokrajhar highlighted the sharp divide between the Bodo and non-Bodo voters and also exhibited the fissures within the Bodo community itself. The candidates ranged from the one-time militant to a former governor of Assam, a powerful state minister, the sitting member of parliament, an independent candidate backed by the regional party, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), and a social activist.³

The elections created concern among Bodos that for the first time in over two decades, there was a strong possibility that a Bodo candidate might not win the Kokrajhar seat.⁴ This fear gave way to a sudden burst of attacks on and killings of Muslims in Kokrajhar soon after the elections, for it was presumed that Muslims had not voted in support of a Bodo candidate. However, this fear could have triggered only part of the violence because supporters of the ruling elite, political entrepreneurs and an armed faction were involved in inciting violence too. The landslide triumph by the non-Bodo candidate only created more Bodo hatred of Muslims because their large minority support was deemed responsible for the success of a non-Bodo. According to the same newspaper article, this election was special:

The Kokrajhar district of Assam is experiencing a change. Hoardings exhorting voters to choose ‘ballot over bullet’ on every street corner has been one of the indicators of this change. The 24 April Lok Sabha polls in this reserved tribal constituency could well set the tone for the future of Kokrajhar and Assam.⁵

Against this backdrop, and using the Lok Sabha elections as a nodal point, the paper explains how ‘contentious politics’ unfurled by means of collective political action by non-Bodos, and had an impact in BTAD. BTAD can be described as a ‘conflict cocktail’ since various levels of conflict occur

² The Indian general election of 2014 was held to constitute the 16th Lok Sabha (the lower house of the Indian parliament), electing members for all 543 parliamentary constituencies in India.

³ Ratnadip Choudhury, ‘Ballots, Bullets and Six Men’, *Tehelka* (3 May 2014) [<http://www.tehelka.com/ballots-bullets-and-six-men/>, accessed 12 Nov. 2015].

⁴ *The Hindu* (26 Dec. 2014) [<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/ndfb-rebels-without-a-cause/article6725372.ece>, accessed 10 Nov. 2015].

⁵ *Ibid.*

along lines of inter- and intra-ethnic and religious dissent and often lead to an escalation of violence.⁶ The mobilisation and political re-alignments that took place are indicative of a larger discourse about identity and ethnic politics in BTAD that coincides with a history of ethno-social, cultural and political subjugation faced by the non-Bodo community against a background of questionable policies,⁷ including ethnic delimitation and arbitrary appeasements that resulted in the drawing of boundaries on ethnic and religious lines. The paper further argues that it is the politicisation of identity, mistrust and long-term grievances that led to the political mobilisation of the non-Bodo population. It also examines the intimate association between electoral politics and the production of collective ethnic identities. In the case of a plural society such as that which exists in Northeast India, ethnic politics can often create new boundaries that cut across ethnic identities, re-drawing them to meet electoral and political goals. Understanding the fluidity of ethnic identities in divided societies is important since it indicates a dynamic situation of contact, conflict and competition, but also mutual accommodation within groups.⁸

The central idea of the paper is to provide an understanding of the intricacies of the 2014 parliamentary elections by focusing on the shift in ethno-political alliances, the mobilisation of non-Bodos, ethnic competition, and co-operation for political gains. Tracing the historical, contextual and political elements that came together along ethnic lines in BTAD after its inception can provide a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of post-poll violence. Beginning with local narratives collected through ethnographic fieldwork carried out in four villages in Kokrajhar and Chirang districts in May and June 2014, the paper also draws from existing literature on ethnicity and electoral politics in South Asia and Assam. Local historical narratives often provide the means to circumvent the homogenising effects of regional stories, especially those that deal with outcomes rather than processes.⁹ Macro-political accounts often make assumptions without acknowledging the

⁶ Benedikt Korf, 'War, Livelihoods and Vulnerability in Sri Lanka', in *Development and Change*, Vol. 35, no. 2 (13 April 2004), pp. 275–95.

⁷ The policies refer to the way the BTAD was created and managed by the state. The BTC districts throw up a contradiction to the concept and practice of democracy in which majorities win elections and rule areas. Although the physical majority is constituted by non-Bodo communities (mentioned below), the Bodo Accord confers on the Bodos political power, including representation in the local Council or Assembly, access to funds and the use of weapons (the place is awash with illegal small arms which have never been surrendered by various 'Accordist' armed bands). See *The Hindu* (26 Dec. 2014) [<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/ndfb-rebels-without-a-cause/article6725372.ece>, accessed 10 Nov. 2015]. Moreover, the Accord is unrepresentative and created an unbridgeable gap between the Bodos and non-Bodos who include the Adivasis, the Bengali Muslims, the Koch-Rajbanshis, the Rabhas and the Assamese. The very nature of 'hegemonic peace' as conceptualised by the Indian state is objectionable. See N.G. Mahanta, 'Politics of Space and Violence in Bodoland', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVIII, no. 23 (8 June 2013), pp. 49–58.

⁸ T.H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), pp. 5–7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

existence of historical differences along linguistic, cultural, political-economic and gender lines.¹⁰ Field observations, historical narratives and informal interviews provided a micro-perspective on the prevailing ethno-political contentions, the shaping of identities in everyday lives, and the role of political entrepreneurs, and unveiled the dynamics of contention prevailing in areas like BTAD.

Ethnic identities, as noted by Brubaker, come with standard set of qualifiers, indicating that these identities are often unstable, multiple, contingent, contested, fragmented, negotiated and so on.¹¹ The Adivasis, Bodos and Muslims in BTAD have undergone similar processes of identity formation, both on religious and ethnic lines, and an event like an election further helps in the construction and transformation of these already-fluid identities. Therefore this election should not simply be viewed as a 'brief interlude' in the politics of BTAD, but can be used to extend our understanding of how contemporary ethnic conflicts are often characterised by the politicisation of collective identities that have formed around ethnic, political, linguistic and/or religious elements. This is almost true of the whole of Northeast India where identity- and ethnicity-based politics have taken on violent expression, often realised through inter-ethnic clashes.¹² However what makes this particular case unique was the use by non-Bodo political entrepreneurs of the democratic space provided by the elections to politically mobilise marginalised various ethnic groups on the basis of a shared identity.

3.2 Background: Creation of BTAD, Contentious Politics, Ethnic Identity and Identity-Based Violence

Approximately 135,000 people, about 5 percent of Assam's population, consider themselves Bodo and claim to be the autochthons of the region. They belong to the group of tribes that dwells in the plains between the Brahmaputra river and the Himalayan foothills of Bhutan.¹³ The Bodos constitute the largest tribal community out of a total of 34 tribal communities in Assam. According to the 2001 Census, the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of Assam was 12.41 percent, of which the Bodos are about 40 percent. Although within BTAD the Bodos constitute a little less than 30 percent of the population, each of the other ethnic groups (e.g. Assamese speakers, Bengali Muslims, Bengali Hindus, Koch-Rajbongshis) is less than 30 percent.

¹⁰ Nancy Lee Peluso, 'A Political Ecology of Violence and Territory in West Kalimantan', in *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 49, no. 1 (April 2008), pp. 48–67.

¹¹ Roger Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 7–15.

¹² Some prominent ones are the Naga-Kuki (1992–96) and the Kuki-Paite (1997–99) clashes in Manipur; Hmar-Dimasa violence in Assam (2003); tribal–non-tribal violence in Tripura (1979–80 and subsequently) and the ongoing inter-tribal conflicts in Nagaland.

¹³ Nel Vandekerckhove and Bert Suykens, 'The Liberation of Bodoland: Tea, Forestry and Tribal Entrapment in Western Assam', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXI, no. 3 (Dec. 2008), pp. 450–71.

Down to here Mahanta attributes the alienation of the Bodos and construction of a separate Bodo identity to three factors: domination by Assamese caste Hindus; the continued influx of immigrants from Bangladesh; and the systematic and gradual encroachment on Bodo land and habitat by non-tribals, primarily Muslim immigrants.¹⁴ The Bodos have been fighting for greater political autonomy since the early decades following India's independence in 1947. This struggle gathered momentum with the founding of the Plain Tribals Council of Assam (PTCA) in the 1960s. After two decades of low-intensity struggle, the Bodos' quest for a separate identity was emboldened by their participation from 1979 to 1984 in the anti-foreigner Assam Movement under the banner of the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). The Bodo movement matured in 1987 with the demand by the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU) for a separate state, with the ABSU and the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPAC) launching their demand to 'divide Assam 50-50'. The 92-point charter of demands marked a distinct phase in the Bodo identity movement. The charter demanded the creation of a separate state of Bodoland, the creation of two district councils on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra and inclusion of the Bodo-Kachari of Karbi Anglong into the government's ST (Hills) list. The period from February to August 1989 was the first violent phase in the Bodo agitation, with Bodo activists embarking on a series of killings, kidnappings, bomb attacks and killings. About 350 people died.¹⁵ Following the death of Upendra Nath Brahma, one of the first Bodo revolutionaries, a more violent group of predominantly Christian Bodos called the Bodo Security Force (BrSF or BdSF) came to the fore.¹⁶

With the Bodo movement slipping out of the hands of the ABSU, a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) was signed in 1993 between the ABSU and BPAC and the Indian government by the then Union minister of state for home affairs and the chief minister of Assam. It is known as the Bodo Accord. In all, 2,570 villages situated in a vast and contiguous area extending from the western border of Kokrajhar up to the eastern border of Darrang district were included in the Bodoland Autonomous Council (BAC).¹⁷ Even villages with less than 50 percent Bodo population were added to the BAC area. However the territory controlled by BAC was not precisely demarcated; nor was the Council granted financial autonomy. The Assam state government continued to meddle in subjects that were supposed to be handled by the Council. This led to what is referred to as the 'Bodo Territorial confusion'.¹⁸

The creation of BAC had satisfied neither non-Bodos nor a section of Bodos. The Council continued to exist despite in-house rivalry, but those holding the reins of power in Assam's capital,

¹⁴ Mahanta, 'Politics of Space and Violence in Bodoland', pp. 49–58.

¹⁵ Vivek Chadha, *Low Intensity Conflict in India* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), p. 264.

¹⁶ Anuradha Dutta and Urmimala Sengupta, *Disturbing Silence—A Look into Conflict Profile of BTAD* (New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2011), pp. 23–9.

¹⁷ Mahanta, 'Politics of Space and Violence in Bodoland', pp. 49–58.

¹⁸ *The North East Times* (6 Jan. 2002), pp. 2–4.

Dispur, used the disarray to their advantage, meaning elections for the Council were never held.¹⁹ By 1996 the militant organisation Bodoland Liberation Tigers (BLT) or Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) had come into being, which ushered in a phase of continuous violent activity aimed at creating a separate state of Bodoland.²⁰

To understand this continuing violence in BTAD, it is useful to trace the genesis of conflict and insurgency in the region that erupted soon after 1993. The notion of ‘contentious politics’ can be used to elucidate the growing resentment felt by the other ethnic groups against the Bodos by expanding on Tilly and Tarrow’s initial definition of the concept. They define ‘contentious politics’ as interactions in which actors make ‘claims’ that bear on others’ interests, leading to co-ordinated efforts by those with shared interests in which governments become the targets, the objects of claims, or third parties.²¹ This extends to a pluralistic society such as Assam, in which the Bodos organised themselves to fight together for a separate state of Bodoland. They wanted to assert Bodo identity through a politics of domination over other ethnic groups. This politics was based on identity and acted as a boundary, both territorial and cultural, between Bodos and non-Bodos. Identity politics can be understood as the manifestation and use of cultural traits in political projects; it can be a claim to power through the articulation and mobilisation of a particular group identity.²²

Contentious politics in most ethnically-fractured societies is therefore the result of a sustained interaction between groups with authority and those without, via collective activity in the name of ‘a populace whose interlocutors declare it to be unjustly suffering harm or threatened with...harm’.²³ Identity-based violence by separatist groups like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) or the BLT that joined in the struggle for a separate state of Bodoland can be seen as part of this contentious politics which actually represents a continuum with non-violent social movements, political parties and interest groups in the area. The idea of contentious politics can be applied to other identity-based movements too, including the secessionist movements against the Indian state led by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) or the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), or even the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which led to the separation of Ireland from the United Kingdom. The ABSU and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha or Bodo Literary Organisation led non-violent social movements that advocated a common Bodo linguistic and cultural identity within the state of Assam.

¹⁹ Dutta and Sengupta, *Disturbing Silence—A Look into Conflict Profile of BTAD*, p. 4.

²⁰ Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation—The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), p. 4.

²¹ Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, rev. ed. 2015), pp. 4–9.

²² Camilla Orjuela, ‘Corruption and Identity Politics in Divided Societies’, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, no. 5 (July 2014), pp. 753–69.

²³ Sanjib Baruah, ‘Separatist Militants and Contentious Politics in Assam, India: The Limits of Counterinsurgency’, in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 49, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 2009), pp. 951–74.

The ULFA became the reference point for various Bodo armed groups, particularly the NDFB that believed that Delhi would not respond to the voice of non-violence. Unlike the NDFB, separation was never an option for the BLT and the ABSU, and their vocabulary was restricted to making constitutionally-sanctioned demands.²⁴ Soon, however, the NDFB and BLT decided to adopt violent means against not only immigrant Muslims, but also other ethnic groups like the Rabhas, Santhals, Koch-Rajbongshis, Nepalis, Bengalis and Assamese-speaking people.²⁵

Eventually, in 2003, negotiations between the Government of Assam, the Indian government and the former militants of the now-disbanded BLT led to the signing of the second Bodo Accord through the MoS of February 2003. This Accord created the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) under modified provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.²⁶ Unlike the first Accord, it only allowed minimal interference by the Assam government in the Council's functioning and it received constitutional status. The BTC comprises four districts: Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, and Udalguri, created by re-organising the existing districts of Assam. These four districts are otherwise known as BTAD.²⁷

Decades later, however, the Bodo leadership continues to demand statehood. It feels it was betrayed by the Assam government because the latter continued to retain control of the home and finance ministries even after the second Accord. Most Bodo intellectuals and civil society organisations feel that the autonomous Bodo Territorial Council was forced on them as a temporary solution to pacify the BLT.²⁸ The three-decade-long rule by BPF (Bodoland People's Front) has also failed to meet the aspirations of the Bodos. The ABSU revived its campaign for a Bodo homeland in 2010 and this has gained further momentum in recent times.

3.3 Political and Cultural (Non)Representation, Ethnic Subjugation, Contention: Bodos and the Ethnic 'Others'

The Bodos seek to transform BTAD into the homeland of the Bodos, although some prominent Bodo leaders argue that non-Bodos are welcome to live in Bodoland too, and that Bodos and non-Bodos

²⁴ Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation—The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam*, p. 9.

²⁵ Mahanta, 'Politics of Space and Violence in Bodoland', pp. 51–8.

²⁶ For more details refer to [http://lawmin.nic.in/olwing/coi/coi-english/Const.Pock%20Pg.Rom8Fsss\(34\).pdf](http://lawmin.nic.in/olwing/coi/coi-english/Const.Pock%20Pg.Rom8Fsss(34).pdf), accessed 10 Nov. 2015.

²⁷ Jaikhleng Basumatary, 'Quest for Peace in Assam—A Study of the Bodoland Movement', Paper No. 44, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi (2014), pp. 15–16 [http://www.claws.in/images/publication_pdf/324891001_MP44Inside28-03-14.pdf, accessed 10 Nov. 2015].

²⁸ This was told to me during informal interviews with members and leaders of ABSU, who were also active participants in the movement for Bodoland.

will co-exist peacefully as long as the latter accept it as Bodo territory.²⁹ The overlap between inequality and ethnic identity is a key problem behind contention in divided societies. It involves a pattern of the marginalisation of certain regions, which extends to certain ethnic groups living there. The Indian state, following the legacy of the colonial administration, drew up the BTC in such a way that resources have been distributed to favour the Bodo ruling minority. This has created ethno-political contention and a boundary between the Bodos and the other ethnic groups in BTAD.

This experience of subjugated ethnicity was widely structured by the foundational political inequality³⁰ which was intrinsic to the way the BTC was created, and in turn became the basis of contentious politics, which is at the heart of the recurring conflict in BTAD. The politicisation of ethnic identity, contention over resources, and political representation and ethnic polarisation have come together to transform Bodoland into what Brubaker described elsewhere as a ‘seething cauldron’ on the verge of boiling over, or a ‘tinderbox’ that a single spark could ignite.³¹ As a result the Accord has been criticised by scholars and policy-makers alike. The possible repercussions of the Accord were been summed up by M.S. Prabhakar in 2003.³²

This ‘ethnic mix’ comprises the caste Hindu Assamese who historically belong to the same ‘ethnic’ stock as the Bodos, the Adivasis and the immigrant Muslim communities, who are apprehensive of the political and economic consequences of a formal acknowledgement of Bodo hegemony in areas which they view, equally, as their home. The setting up of the BTC without clarifying these issues is likely to be one of the most problematic aspects of the functioning of the BTC.

Udayon Misra thinks similarly about the Accord. In 2012 he explained how the creation of a particular ethnic homeland that had not ensured the constitutional rights of the other ethnic groups living in the region was at the root of a series of extremely violent instances of identity-based ethno-religious violence.³³

The BTC has failed to allay the anxieties of the Bodos, barely 28 percent of the total population, who fear erosion of their identity, language and cultural hegemony, and their domination of the political processes; and it has as well been unable to protect the rights and lives of the non-Bodo population. There have been repeated attacks by Bodos on Muslims (in 1993, 2008, 2012 and

²⁹ This information emerged during informal discussions with development practitioners from NGOs and some local Bodo leaders.

³⁰ Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*, pp. 5–11.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

³² M.S. Prabhakar, ‘Territories of Fear’, in *Frontline*, Vol. 20, no. 24 (Nov./Dec. 2003) [<http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2024/stories/20031205003103900.htm>], accessed 10 Nov. 2015].

³³ Udayon Misra, ‘Bodoland: The Burden of History’, in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVII, no. 37 (15 Sept. 2012), pp. 36–42.

2014), resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands of displacements. Similar attacks on Adivasis and Santhals occurred in 1996, 1998 and most recently in December 2014.³⁴ In turn, somewhat limited retaliation by these aggrieved ethnic groups has further threatened the Bodos' sense of security. However these events cannot merely be viewed as sporadic instances of violence, since almost every occurrence has been preceded by politicisation of the population on ethnic lines and polarisation on political ones. This then has fostered the creation of separate collective identities by the non-Bodo groups that have each experienced marginalisation, restricted mobility and targeted violence.

According to Namrata Goswami, 'The Bodo Accord of 2003 guarantee[d] that the BTC will fulfill the economic, educational and linguistic aspirations and preserve land-rights, socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the Bodos'.³⁵ However these guarantees continue to exist only on paper, or have been poorly implemented owing to weak and corrupt administrative institutions, thereby failing to mitigate the levels of insecurity felt by the Bodos vis-a-vis the other ethnic communities. In addition, the practice by members of the BTC of introducing divisive politics in order to further personal agendas has worsened the problems: '[I]n May 2012, the BTC Chief Hagrama Mohilary had accused the minority representative in the BTC, Kalilur Rehman of the Indian National Congress (INC) of instigating the minority community against the Bodos...without offering concrete evidence to back up his claims'.³⁶ These types of allegations by Bodo leaders have the potential to spark violence; following Hagrama Mohilary's accusations, fighting broke out 'which had led to the death of nearly 96 people (both Bodo and non-Bodo)'.³⁷

In terms of the composition of the BTC, 30 out of 46 seats are reserved for STs (including, of course, Bodos), five for non-tribals, five are open to all communities and the remaining six are nominated by the governor of Assam from among the unrepresented communities (e.g. Nepalis, Rabhas, Garos etc.). Clearly the Bodos view this Accord as a historical opportunity to fulfill their long-standing ethno-political demands. In the Council policy decisions related to development funds, land revenue, business taxes and welfare schemes are based on a majority vote; unsurprisingly the Bodos are considered the main beneficiaries. The Accord also vests the council with power under the Panchayati Raj system.³⁸ While the Accord explicitly states that non-Bodos should not

³⁴ *The Tribune* (28 Dec. 2014) [<http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/kaleidoscope/the-killing-fields-of-assam/23325.html>, accessed 10 Nov. 2015].

³⁵ Namrata Goswami, 'Why Bodo Violence Continues to Recur?', *Idsa* (29 Dec. 2014) [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/WhyBodoViolenceContinuestoRecur_ngoswami_291214, accessed 10 Nov. 2014]. For more information on the Accord, see 'Memorandum of Settlement on BTC' [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/documents/papers/memorandum_feb02.htm, accessed 11 Nov. 2015].

³⁶ Goswami, 'Why Bodo Violence Continues to Recur?'.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Panchayati Raj is a system of governance in which village *panchayats* or councils are the basic unit of local administration. The system has three levels: *gram panchayat* (village level), *mandal parishad* or block *samiti* or

be disadvantaged, in reality their rights are not fully acknowledged by the BTC. This has given rise to a situation where, due to the changing demographics in BTAD, the Bodos are apprehensive of being reduced to an ethnic and cultural minority in hitherto Bodo-dominated areas; and where non-Bodos believe that Bodos should no longer have the right to rule over the other three-quarters of the population.³⁹

Collective myths and fears shared by ethnic groups often lead to mass or elite-driven mobilisations that incite inter-ethnic conflict.⁴⁰ As well, there is invariably the imagining of a common homeland, symbolic or otherwise, and a sense of solidarity among some groups.⁴¹ This is true of BTAD, where each ethnic group is trying to establish its roots, fiercely guard its ethnic identity, and make claims over resources. Contentious politics also refers to this collective political struggle. In this sense, the term can be extended to cover other less-sustained forms of conflict like waves of strikes and riots, and more ongoing ones such as civil wars, revolutions, and episodes of democratisation. Moreover it intersects with routine political processes like elections and interest group politics.⁴² These collective identities of marginalisation were exploited by numerous non-Bodo leaders (who are referred to here as political entrepreneurs) in order to mobilise the Muslims, Santhals, Rajbanshis and other communities to vote together against the Bodo candidates in the 2014 parliamentary elections.

3.4 Parliamentary Elections: Collective Action, Mobilisation, and Shifts in Alliances

The Kokrajhar seat has been a stronghold of either the BPF or held by an independent Bodo candidate since the first Lok Sabha polls held in 1952. The majority of Bodos consider the seat a platform for political expression of their demands at the centre. However in recent times the BPF has been blamed for failing to realise a separate state for the Bodo community which has led to friction between the party and ABSU. Because of its failure to get a separate Bodo state, the BPF in 2014 refused to endorse the sitting member, Sansuma Khunggur Bwismuthiary, as its candidate even though he had already won the Kokrajhar seat four times in a row. Having lost the BPF's support, he contested the seat as an independent, thereby weaning a substantial chunk of his supporters away from the BPF to campaign for him. Bwismuthiary had acquired a reputation as a fiery politician due

panchayat samiti (block level), and *zila parishad* (district level).

³⁹ Goswami, 'Why Bodo Violence Continues to Recur?'

⁴⁰ S.J. Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 9–12.

⁴¹ John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith, *Ethnicity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 6–7.

⁴² Sidney Tarrow, 'Contentious Politics', *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements* (2013) [<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470674871.wbepm051/abstract>, accessed 10 July 2015].

to his uncharitable remarks about non-Bodos. Given that the Bodos are not a numerical majority in Kokrajhar, the BPF probably also withdrew its support for Bwismathiary to avoid consolidating the non-Bodo vote, and instead chose another prominent Bodo leader, Chandan Brahma.⁴³ The Kokrajhar electorate at first sight emerges as a reflection of Bodo politics, with multiple high-profile candidates from the Bodo community. In the end, however, the Bodo votes were divided between the BPF candidate, Chandan Brahma, and Urkha Brahma who was supported by ABSU, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland–P (NDFB Progressive, a pro-talks faction), and other Bodo civil society organisations.

The concept of contentious politics in the context of electoral politics in societies like BTAD helps us to better understand the processes of mobilisation of non-Bodos, using the historical repertoire of Bodo domination. The co-ordinated claims made by non-Bodo groups generated a political re-alignment that culminated in the collective action of voting en masse for a non-Bodo candidate. The Bodos retaliated by instigating post-poll violence. The elections had brought out some main axes of contention that explain the shifts in ethnic boundaries and political alliances, the processes and nature of such alliances—how they were formed and towards what end. However it is important to look beyond the shifting alliances to grasp what this fluid nature of ethno-political alliances seeks to represent in a multi-ethnic society characterised by competition for and access to political power and resources. Discussed below are some of the dynamics that were identified during and after the elections that are significant in explaining the nature of contentious politics in BTAD in particular, and multi-ethnic contentious societies in general.

3.5 Collective Action through Ethnic Mobilisation and Subsequent Retaliation

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections about twenty non-Bodo ethnic and linguistic groups under the banner of Sanmilita Janagostiya Aikkyamancha (SJA) united to support an independent non-Bodo candidate and former militant, Naba Sarania. Sanjib Baruah finds this particular choice of a consensus candidate by the non-Bodos of Kokrajhar quite significant, especially given Sarania's past association with the ULFA and his popular reputation as a feared militant known for his combat skills against the Indian armed forces.⁴⁴ Baruah adds that the non-Bodos had found a candidate whose reputed military prowess equaled that of the current Bodo leadership, which consists of

⁴³ Bhasker Pegu, 'The Real Story of the Conflict in Western Assam', *Live Mint* (8 May 2014) [<http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/DkmMauJSK8Wtcxy5F82o7H/The-real-story-of-the-conflict-in-western-Assam.html>, accessed 5 Nov. 2015].

⁴⁴ Sanjib Baruah, 'The Politics of Electoral Violence', *Outlook* (9 May 2014) [<http://www.outlookindia.com/article/the-politics-of-electoral-violence/290704>, accessed 8 Nov. 2015].

former BLT militants. These trends reveal the dangerous crisis of state capacity in Assam.⁴⁵ The way in which one former militant was pitted against a political party formed by rebels who had surrendered was nicely summed up in an interview with a local leader of the All Bodo Minority Student Union (ABMSU). He played an active part in mobilising votes for Sarania within the scope of the SJA or the ‘A-Bodo’ or non-Bodo Surakshya Samiti (ABSS),⁴⁶ and declared with some pride that ‘if the Bodos have their tiger (hinting at the chief of BTAD and ex-BLT leader Hagrama Mohillary) we have our lion too’. In much of the conversation he identified himself and most of his friends from the Muslim or Adivasi communities as ‘us: a-Bodos’.⁴⁷

This long drawn-out struggle of the non-Bodo ethnic groups for assertion of their non-Bodo identity and political representation finally led to an ethno-political re-alignment through ethnic co-operation among an otherwise heterogeneous electorate to unite behind Naba Sarania. This new political alliance could be perceived as a collective response to a history of ethno-political subjugation. The selection of a former ULFA militant as candidate is at the same time symbolic, since the non-Bodos wanted to challenge the existing status quo through the politics of collective identity. So it was important to project someone who could implicitly challenge the Bodos, by force if needed. Moreover, Sarania was able to harness the growing resentment and shared grievances of the non-Bodos, and secured the backing of several influential political entrepreneurs. The ABMSU, dominated largely by Bengali-speaking Muslims, together with a faction of the All Koch Rajbongshi Students’ Union (AKRSU), came out during the campaign to mobilise collective support for Sarania, who was represented as an insider who would uphold the cause of non-Bodos.⁴⁸ Muslims constitute about 33 percent of the total population, followed by Bodos who are around 28 percent; Rajbonshis and Santhals make up 15 percent and 6 percent respectively.⁴⁹ This played on existing Bodo trepidation that they would now be represented in parliament by a non-Bodo who was against the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Most Bodos I spoke to, including members of civil society, development practitioners and service holders like teachers, government officials, writers, doctors and lawyers, consider this concept of ‘a-bodo’ as unconstitutional because it seeks to mobilise one community against another community (read Bodos). However according to the above-mentioned ABMU leader, this is not merely a political strategy, but is felt by the minority communities that dwell in BTAD as a necessity in order to protect their rights and preserve their identities, and also to safeguard themselves against recurring conflict in the area.

⁴⁷ This comes across as a process of collective identity assertion by non-Bodo ethnic groups (‘a-Bodos’) such as Muslims, Santhals, Rajbonshis etc., who clearly are trying to position themselves collectively as non-Bodos first, and who only use their particular ethnic identities later and if required. Being a ‘non-Bodo’ here comes before being a Muslim, Santhal or Rajbonshi.

⁴⁸ *The Hindu* (22 April 2014) [<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-otherstates/bodoland-the-key-issue-in-kokrajhar-battle/article5935881.ece> , accessed 3 Nov. 2015].

⁴⁹ ‘The Current crisis in Bodoland’, *The Milli Gazette* (14 Oct. 2012) [<http://www.milligazette.com/news/4211-the-current-crisis-in-Bodoland> , accessed 8 Oct. 2015].

creation of a separate state of Bodoland and who also stood up to protect non-Bodo identities.

Immediately after the polls, a former Assam government minister and BPF leader, Promila Rani Barhma, blamed the Muslims for not voting for the Bodo candidates.⁵⁰ Amid tight security on the ground, barely a week after the elections of 24 April 2014, post-poll violence broke out, mainly targeted against the Muslim community. In the first week of May 45 people were killed in Kokrajhar and Baksa districts of BTAD, yet again mainly from the minority Muslim community. Several houses were torched and hundreds of people (mostly Muslims) were displaced and fled out of fear. People from other communities like the Adivasis and Rajbonshis also fled in anticipation of further violence.⁵¹ This immediate retaliation is both reflective of the prevailing contention felt by the Bodos, and an attempt to reinforce sharp boundaries between the Bodos and the ethnic ‘others’⁵².

3.6 The Bodo–Muslim Contention: Changing Demographics and Fear of Land Alienation

Frequently labelled as Bangladeshis, Muslims have historically been a soft target in the region. The Bodos feel that Muslim immigrants are swamping the area and altering its demographics. The immigration issue assumes further importance because Bodos believe that Muslim settlers lend support to illegal immigrants from Bangladesh by helping them cross the border into India and settling them on their lands. As well there have been reports of rampant encroachment on state-owned forest land by Muslim settlers.⁵³ Recently a political consensus has been reached in Assam for the need to update the National Register of Citizens (NRC) 1951 by including the names of all persons who were on the 1971 electoral rolls, and their descendants. An update of the NRC 1951 has been a longstanding demand of various socio-political organisations including the AASU, which led the Assam Agitation in 1979–85 against illegal immigration from Bangladesh. Delhi, Dispur and AASU reached an agreement in 2005 to make midnight on 24 March 1971 the new cut-off date for detection of foreigners and listing citizens on an updated NRC. The BPF, Axom

⁵⁰ Nazimuddin Siddique, ‘Massacre in Assam’, in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX, no. 22 (31 May 2014), pp. 16–18.

⁵¹ For more information about the violence see ‘Report of Fact-Finding Team from Centre for Policy Analysis, New Delhi’ [http://www.iosworld.org/download/fact-%20finding_Baska_Assam.pdf, accessed 2 Dec. 2015]. Also see *The Guardian* (3 May 2014) [<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/03/dozens-muslims-killed-ethnic-violence-north-east-india-assam>, accessed 2 Dec. 2015]; and Kaustubh Deka, ‘The Violence in Assam is about neither “Hindu-Muslim” nor “Illegal Bangladeshi Immigrants”’, Scroll.in (4 May 2014) [<http://scroll.in/article/663524/the-violence-in-assam-is-neither-hindu-muslim-nor-about-illegal-bangladeshi-immigrants>, accessed 2 Dec. 2015].

⁵² Baruah, ‘The Politics of Electoral Violence’.

⁵³ ‘Assam Violence: 5 Key Facts about the Bodo–Muslim Conflict’, Firstpost India (4 May 2014) [<http://www.firstpost.com/india/assam-violence-5-key-facts-about-the-bodo-muslim-conflict-1507865.html>, accessed 10 Nov. 2015].

Gana Parishad, ABSU, All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and AASU have welcomed the update which has already begun in several districts of Assam.

3.7 Making ‘Claims’: Retaliation Through the Use of Electoral Politics

It was observed that the prelude to the Lok Sabha elections was characterised positively by campaign strategies that urged the different ethnic groups to choose the ballot over the bullet. For the first time since 1952, the people in this troubled periphery realised the importance of this message. In the end, though, the bullet prevailed, with revenge by Bodos against Muslims. This was initially manifested in the form of clashes on polling day in Gossaigaon, a Kokrajhar sub-division predominantly inhabited by Bengali Muslims. The immediate cause was a rumour that the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) in numerous polling stations across the constituency were being tampered with so that all votes would go to the BPF candidate. As a result several minority voters attacked the polling booths, killing a policeman and injuring another. In return the paramilitary forces opened fire to disperse the crowd.⁵⁴ Post-poll violence ensued a week later in the form of targeted killing of Bengali-speaking Muslims, mostly women and children, and the burning down of over one hundred houses, leading to hundreds of people being displaced in Kokrajhar and Baksa districts.

The Bodos had used violence to undermine possible collective action by non-Bodos. The Bodo leadership had not anticipated such large-scale collective defiance and identity-based mobilisation against the Bodo candidates.⁵⁵ The collective mobilisation of the non-Bodos can also be described using the term ethnic solidarity, which can be further substantiated by Barth’s theory about the situational nature of ethnic groups and the importance of the drawing of boundaries delineating insiders and outsiders.⁵⁶ This ethnic solidarity, realised through shared grievances, binds certain groups together and ‘entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signaling membership

⁵⁴ *Mail Online India* (4 May 2014) [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2619741/Toll-Assam-violence-rises-32-Omar-accuses-Modi-poisoning-hearts-people-against-Muslims.html>, accessed 2 Dec. 2015].

⁵⁵ Nani Gopal Mahanta, ‘Lok Sabha Elections in Assam: Shifting of Traditional Vote Bases to BJP’, in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX, no. 35 (30 Aug. 2014), pp. 19–22.

⁵⁶ I refer here to Fredrik Barth’s work on ethnic groups and boundaries. Barth’s theoretical framework sets out the subtle and sinuous frontiers of ethnic boundaries, the interconnectedness of ethnic identities and the continuity of ethnic groups. Ethnic groups can, as he wrote, ‘promote their own, new cultural identity, even as their old identity is eroded’. Ethnic groups have come to assert and affirm themselves more often in recent decades, utilising an international discourse of human rights (for instance Bretons, Basques, Tamils, Palestinians, Sikhs, Quebequois, etc.). Rather than groups disappearing into one big indistinct ‘pot’ of muddled and diluted traditions, symbols, practices, languages, and so on, ethnic groups spring forth, are revived and/or created (or can be selectively destroyed). See Eugene Rosens, *Creating Ethnicity: The Process of Ethnogenesis* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1989), pp. 14–22; and ethnic identities are asserted and maintained all over the world. See Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press Inc., 1969), pp. 9–21.

and exclusion'.⁵⁷ While it was not exactly the ethnic boundaries that were re-drawn in the case of the parliamentary elections, the political boundaries of ethnic organisation were re-drawn, leading to the successful mobilisation of non-Bodos in a political backlash against the dominant Bodos. The non-Bodos were actively trying to engineer a split in the already re-drawn electorate between the Bodos and the non-Bodos, and the Bodos retaliated in order to maintain the existing ethnic boundaries.⁵⁸

Considering that ethnic groups in general are transitional and situational, essentially characterised by instances of competition and co-operation, yet having their personal and group identities intimately linked to political processes, a new round of ethnic mobilisation could well be on the cards. This could fracture the current non-Bodo political mobilisation and divide it again on ethnic or religious lines according to political calculations. In such a situation, the election of Sarania stands out as a very significant episode. Tilly and Tarrow define episodes in the framework of contentious politics as 'bounded sequences of continuous interaction, usually produced by an investigator's chopping up longer streams of contention into segments',⁵⁹ in this case it could well refer to the production and expression of collective identities and their mobilisation for political gains. The process of producing a collective identity combined with the grievances felt by non-Bodos, and with discourses produced by political entrepreneurs such as ABMU, SJA and others in pursuit of political objectives. Ethnic and religious identities appeal to the needs of minority communities for belonging, meaning and recognition.⁶⁰

The means and processes of production and manifestation of collective identities are rooted in a wider identity assertion process that has been bolstered by the recognition of a Bodo homeland under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.⁶¹ This was evident from the polarisation patterns that emerged in BTAD politics and which were in sharp contrast to the rest of Assam. In the 13 other parliamentary constituencies in the state there was a distinct polarisation between Muslim and non-Muslim voters. Non-Muslim votes went largely to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Muslim votes to the AIUDF,⁶² and to a lesser extent the INC. By contrast, the Kokrajhar constituency emerged

⁵⁷ Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, pp. 15–16.

⁵⁸ Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation—The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam*, pp. 6–10.

⁵⁹ Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, pp. 4–10.

⁶⁰ Orjuela, 'Corruption and Identity Politics in Divided Societies', pp. 753–69.

⁶¹ Mahanta, 'Politics of Space and Violence in Bodoland', pp. 50–8.

⁶² The AIUDF is a political party that was established in 2005 to mainly represent the rights of the minorities and the Muslims in Assam. The AIUDF managed to gain 18 seats in the Assembly polls in 2011 and emerged as the single largest opposition party in Assam. In the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, the AIUDF won two of the 14 seats from Assam. Moreover, the AIUDF has actively supported the ABMSU to emerge as a powerful body representing Muslim interests in the BTAD. See Kaustubh Deka, 'Assam Violence: Neither about Hindu–Muslim Rift nor Bangla Migrants', *Caravan Daily* (6 May 2014)

[<http://caravandaily.com/portal/the-violence-in-assam-is-about-neither-hindu-muslim-nor-illegal-bangladeshi->

as an exception to this general trend. There was a consolidation of Muslim and non-Muslim voters against the Bodo candidates. The prime issue was the historical politics of Bodo domination through the construction of a territorial Council that largely embodies and imposes this discourse through language policies, cultural symbolism, and unequal access to or exclusion from political influence and development resources, leading to a feeling of shared marginalisation by the non-Bodos.

3.8 Aftermath: Observations and the Post-Election Scenario

The 2014 parliamentary elections in Kokrajhar were of immense political significance for ethnically-divided societies in general and, given the ethno-electoral discussion of the political history of the region, in particular; and the social consequences were also far-reaching. BTAD has become a society where notions of ‘majority’, ‘minority’, ‘indigenous’ and ‘immigrant’ have become territorially scaled.⁶³

Interviews conducted with members of the Muslim community and civil society organisations after the elections provided some interesting insights into the processes of the production of collective identities. The process of mobilisation, at least from the perspective of Muslims living in two relief camps and two villages,⁶⁴ seemed to be an elite arrangement that had been largely initiated by political entrepreneurs rather than a process having widespread popular support. The non-Bodo vote did not necessarily endorse Sarania; rather, it was a vote against the Bodos, especially after the violence that had been initiated against Muslims in 2012.⁶⁵ Interestingly, when asked if they had ever seen or met the candidate they voted for, or if he had organised campaigns to explain his manifesto or agenda, the response was a negative. They chose Sarania because were told by the local political entrepreneurs to do so.

Of significance too is the issue of Sarania’s own ethnic identity, namely his ST status, which continues to be contested by various civil society groups, including ST (Bodo) leaders and the

immigrants/, accessed 11 Nov. 2015].

⁶³ Nancy Peluso writes about the relationship between violence and territory in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. See Peluso, ‘A Political Ecology of Violence and Territory in West Kalimantan’, pp. 48–67.

⁶⁴ They lived in Nawarbhita village and in temporary shelters/camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) under Dotoma division and in Duramari village. People have now mostly returned home from the camps.

⁶⁵ Ethnic violence between Bodos and Bengali Muslims took place in July 2012, mainly affecting Kokrajhar, Chirang and Dhubri districts. More than 100 people were killed and nearly five million were displaced from their homes. Most did not return home until January 2013, but remained in relief camps too afraid to return. Even once the camps were formally shut down and people had returned to their homes, normalcy was still a distant reality. Fear is still rampant and the past continues to haunt the Muslim community. Informal discussions with villagers and IDPs who were the victims of this conflict, and with local journalists, the villages of Duramari and Dotoma, and Joypur and Maligaon

Relief Camps, 15 May to 5 June 2014.

Janajati Suraksha Samiti. Naba Sarania belongs to the Sarania Kachari community, which is not identified as ST under Article 342 (1) and (2) of the Indian Constitution, and is not included in the ST list for Assam as per the constitutional (ST) order of 1950 or any of its subsequent amendments. The ST certificate granted to him was under the Bodo Kachari community that is a notified ST community. He is accused of presenting himself as a member of a sub-caste of the Bodo Kachari, although there is no constitutional provision for a community to partly retain its name and partly adopt the name of another community. The petition filed against Naba Sarania is still pending in the Guwahati High Court, and he has been asked to furnish documents validating his ST status.⁶⁶

Interestingly, right after casting their votes, the minority communities sensed the possibility of violent Bodo retaliation which could well be rooted in their past experiences of being in situations of ethnic conflict. The violence this time was orchestrated against the Muslim community because it had not voted for a Bodo candidate; because the other minority ethnic groups had also voted for a non-Bodo candidate they feared similar retaliation and fled their villages.⁶⁷ They were put up in makeshift camps in and around Kokrajhar.

However, the collective mobilisation remained strictly at a political level. The non-Bodo communities continued to maintain the existing social and cultural boundaries. Although almost all non-Bodo ethnic groups voted for Sarania, only Muslims faced the brunt of the post-poll violence. This indicates the fluidity of the temporal production of collective identities; the mobilisation was strong enough to win the elections, but it was not resilient enough to protect and safeguard the lives of the vulnerable Muslim electors. The expectation that Sarania's armed leadership background would act as a deterrent to violence turned out to be unfulfilled. Not surprisingly, when interviewed after the violence, the Muslim community did not exult in their candidate's win but rather expressed disappointment at such an incredible victory. 'He won by too many votes' expressed their view that the large winning margin had ended up costing them their homes and lives. Their fears were spelled out in one common theme: 'outsiders'. There was and continues to be a constant need for

⁶⁶ The issue was explained to me during an interview and discussion with Mr. Janaklal Basumatary, former IRS officer and a civil society activist who has been responsible for filing the petition against Naba Sarania. Interview and discussion, Kokrajhar town, April 2015. Also see *The Telegraph* (22 April 2014) [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140422/jsp/northeast/story_18263392.jsp#.VTpRh2Sqkko , accessed 11 Nov. 2015]; 'Objections against Sarania, Murmu', *Assam Times* (4 April 2014) [<http://www.assamtimes.org/node/10415>, accessed 11 Nov. 2015]; and *The Sentinal* (20 April 2014) [<http://www.sentinelassam.com/state1/story.php?sec=2&subsec=2&id=189288&dtP=2014-05-22&ppr=1>, accessed 11 Nov. 2015].

⁶⁷ Benedikt Korf writes of similar ethnic dynamics in the context of the civil war in Sri Lanka where inhabitants fled from a particular place in anticipation of violence, based on some sort of information or rumour, even before such an incident had taken place. See Benedikt Korf, 'The Certainty of Uncertainty: Topographies of Risk and Landscapes of Fear in Sri Lanka's Civil War', in D. Müller-Mahn (ed.), *The Spatial Dimension of Risk: How Geography Shapes the Emergence of Risksapes* (London: Earthscan, 2013), pp. 68–81.

Muslims to reassert their political as well as legal identity and to establish claims to the land where they live. It appears that a three-fold strategy consisting of the production of collective and shared ethnicities, a history of subjugation and contentious politics was used for the political mobilisation of the non-Bodos by the political entrepreneurs. The Muslim leadership, working through the SJA, succeeded in harnessing ‘collective memories’ of carnage, which seemed to be the common thread that ran through the Muslim community in BTAD.

3.9 Conclusion

This paper argues that the Bodo sense of exclusion in Assam led to the production of contentious politics and collective action by the Bodos against their historical domination by the Assamese. Yet the Bodos’ own politics in the BTC created similar resentment amongst the other ethnic groups living there, and led to a new phase of collective action by the non-Bodo groups. This in turn resulted in an electoral–political re-drawing of ethnic and religious boundaries (apparent in the election of Sarania). However the Bodos’ retaliation against the Muslims means this political realignment is most likely short-lived. This case illustrates the possibility of poorly-represented groups in autonomous councils engaging in contentious politics, and holds wider relevance for several other societies across Northeast India.

The production and politicisation of ethnic categories through the politics of contention can be extended to most divided societies, as seen in the work of Benedikt Korf on Sri Lanka and Nancy Lee Peluso on Indonesia. In the context of Dayak–Madurese violence in West Kalimantan, Peluso has described how recurrent episodes of ethnic violence helped to naturalise and harden categories of ethnic difference in new ways: ‘Ethnic difference was constructed and lived through government policies, colonial and contemporary laws, through integration into a post-colonial national state, as well as through explicit efforts to revitalise and reconfigure identity and culture’.⁶⁸

In such situations there is a constant production and reproduction of ‘us and them’. Seemingly everything contributes to this binary concept, hardening ethnic categories. This does not cause violence *per se*, but it has the capacity to aggravate relations and has been used in both the justification and analysis of violence. These ethnic categories work to shape the targeting of violence which in turn helps to produce the contemporary ethnic identities of the opposing ‘groups’.⁶⁹ Moreover, the democratic space provided by elections can become an arena where contestations are manifested in violent form, as has occurred in pre- and post-electoral communal violence in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Maharashtra, among others.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Peluso, ‘A Political Ecology of Violence and Territory in West Kalimantan’, p. 56.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48–67.

⁷⁰ Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge

Both identity and ethnicity can be instrumentalised in ways that are often intricate and intertwined: ethnic polarisation and mobilisation can be used for collective action in the name of democracy and can cause repercussions for the groups whose ethnicities have been subjugated. Identity-based grievances may be historically related to inequality, fear and mistrust of each other in particular and of the state in general, and can play out in 'episodes'. A process- and episode-oriented understanding of 'in-group' and 'out-group' usually explains ethnicity-based violent conflict in unstable societies and creates spaces for collective action by subjugated groups. This paper has explained the fluid and negotiable nature of the production and processes of the construction of ethnic identities, and that asymmetrical inter-ethnic relationships can form the basis for contention and lead to conflict in fragile societies.

4 Constellations of Power and Authority in the Political Economy of Illegal Timber Extraction in BTAD, Assam

Dutta, A. & Suykens, B. (2017). Constellations of Power and Authority in the Political Economy of Illegal Timber Extraction in BTAD, Assam. *Alternatives*, 42(3), 146-165.

This article was conceptualized by Anwesha Dutta inspired by an earlier paper by Bert Suykens on the Beedi commodity chain in South India (tribal Telengana). Dr. Suykens helped with the organization and structuring of the various sections while also contributing the two schematics in the article (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The ethnographic data was collected by Anwesha Dutta and analyzed by both the authors. Both authors worked on the revisions from the external reviewers.

Abstract

This article seeks to comprehend the way the illegal timber economy in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council (BTAD) in Assam is integrated within a constellation of power and authority. Based on over ten months of ethnographic field research, our analysis shows that the timber trade is indeed characterized by what can be conceptualized as an excess of sovereignty. However, a burdened agency is still exercised by those in the timber trade. Moreover, the authority structure consisting of state, rebel and non-armed actors do not directly engage violently in the trade, but are more interested in taxation, governance, or indeed wildlife protection, showing the other side of this multiple authority structure. As the article shows, different ethnic groups, which are often thought to be diametrically opposed to each other, collaborate in the local timber commodity chain. However, highly unequal relations of exchange characterize these collaborations. As we argue, those that have preferential access to the authority structure can use this to dictate the terms of interaction. Finally, while the timber economy is usually characterized by the operation of the constellation of power and authority, there are interstitial moments where the (violent) interactions among the actors embedded in the structure weaken the direct territorial control by them. As a result, times of violence are often also those in which the trade can flourish.

Keywords: Illegal logging, authority structure, commodity chain, ethnic conflict, burdened agency, political economy.

The Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council (BTAD), located at the borders of Assam with both Bhutan and West Bengal, has long been a sensitive space¹ in which rebel movements have been fighting for (Bodo) autonomy. Even after a peace deal with one of the major Bodo rebel groups, the region granted autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitutions and placed most (if not all) political power in the hands of a Bodo elite, the area has been marred by repeated rounds of ethnic violence, with Bengali Muslim and Adivasi groups mostly bearing the brunt of this violence. Within this context, an illegal timber economy has been thriving. While this is not remarkable given the proliferation of literature on the linkages between resource extraction and conflict, this has been often linked to conflict financing by armed groups. What this article first highlights is the way in which state, rebel, and non-armed actors integrate in this extraction network. As such, this article wants to unravel the authority structure—akin to what Richard Snyder has called the “institutions of extraction”²—making illegal timber extraction possible. However, as the article will argue, the multiple authority structures are not integrating on a level-playing field and there are important limits to the negotiated character of their interactions. Their individual capacity for violence—what some might consider their de facto sovereign qualities³—and connection to a greatly disaggregated state, as well as the spatial logic of the timber extraction chain itself allows different forms of authority to claim differentiated access to rents.

Secondly, the article wants to underline the way an ethnically differentiated labor force has been integrated into the illegal timber economy. As such, we illustrate the manner in which multiple ethnic groups (Bodo, Adivasi, Bengali Muslim), who are in the larger narrative of the conflict considered at odds with each other, are deployed in the illegal timber economy. While this points toward interethnic collaboration across conflict lines in order to make trees into marketable hard-wood product, our case does not corroborate liberal peace assumptions about potential transformations of economic collaboration into political appeasement. Not only is the deployment of labor spatially divided, the relations of exchange in the labor chain are highly unequal, mediated as they are by violence and political and social exclusion.

While thus focusing on an illegal timber economy, the article also wants to emphasize on the functioning of *the* authority structure or “constellation of power”⁴ in BTAD and the way populations relate to it in a combination of coercion (power) and consent (authority). In the rest of the article, we will use constellation of power and authority and authority structure interchangeably. This constellation of power and authority at the time of our research was the outcome of a particular (colonial) history of forestry and (forced) migration, the postcolonial engagement with both migration and (plains) tribal populations, a long-lasting armed struggle and repeated violence on ethnic lines,

which among other things led to the large-scale presence of security personnel and a relative absence of state forestry personnel. Figure 4.1 tries to provide a schematic overview of authorities and powers present, distinguishing between those with important violent capabilities from those without, and between those that constitute *the* state in Bodoland, and those that do not.

The conditions of possibility for the specific shape that the illegal timber economy in BTAD takes is the outcome of a long-drawn and sometimes violent negotiation process between different sources of power and authority. As such, our argument is indebted both to recent discussions on the functioning of (public) authority in postcolonial contexts and those engaged with related questions of state and sovereignty (for a full discussion on how these literatures can be combined in South Asian contexts, see Hansen and Stepputat; Klem and Suykens).⁵

The work of Christian Lund⁶ has been crucial in repositioning public authority as a trope to understand the multiplicity of actors, organizations, and groups engaged in claiming the capacity to rule. These both invoke state authority and resist it and sometimes combine both tendencies. Claims are often overlapping and the particular authority structure is thus a dynamic product of an intense process of negotiation. At the time of this study, the central locus of authority was vested in the leadership of the BTAD, which had emerged after the tripartite peace treaty, signed in 2003, between the government of Assam, central Government of India, and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT). Its personification and the main center of gravity was Mr. Hagrama Mohilary, chief of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) and former head of the BLT. At the same time, not only elected politicians, state bureaucrats, and (former) rebels (of different rebel movements) but also student groups were a part of the constellation of power and authority.

While Lund⁷ makes a distinction between (legitimate) authority and the more naked display of power, such distinctions become empirically ineffective, as power and/or authority in Bodoland are both spatially and temporally contingent. At the same time, and crucial for the argument made here, the process of negotiation mentioned is far from a level-playing field and, as pointed out by Pauline Peters⁸ in Lund's special issue, there are serious limits to negotiation. Power imbalances and, crucially in our case, the capacity to deploy violence are vital factors that constitute these limits.

The question of violence of course links directly with the concerns of this special issue and with discussions of state and de facto sovereignty. While we do not take questions of sovereignty as a starting point in this article, it is clear that the capacity to deploy lethal violence with impunity is not so easily divided between state and non-state actors. Moreover, and in line with Veena Das and Deborah Poole's⁹ work on the margins of the state, and, in particular, Deborah Poole's¹⁰ contribution to the same volume, it is clear that even for those actors associated with the state in BTAD, the distinction between legal punishment and "personalized or extrajudicial violence"¹¹ is far from clear. It is exactly the blurring lines between authority derived from being the state and the capacity to

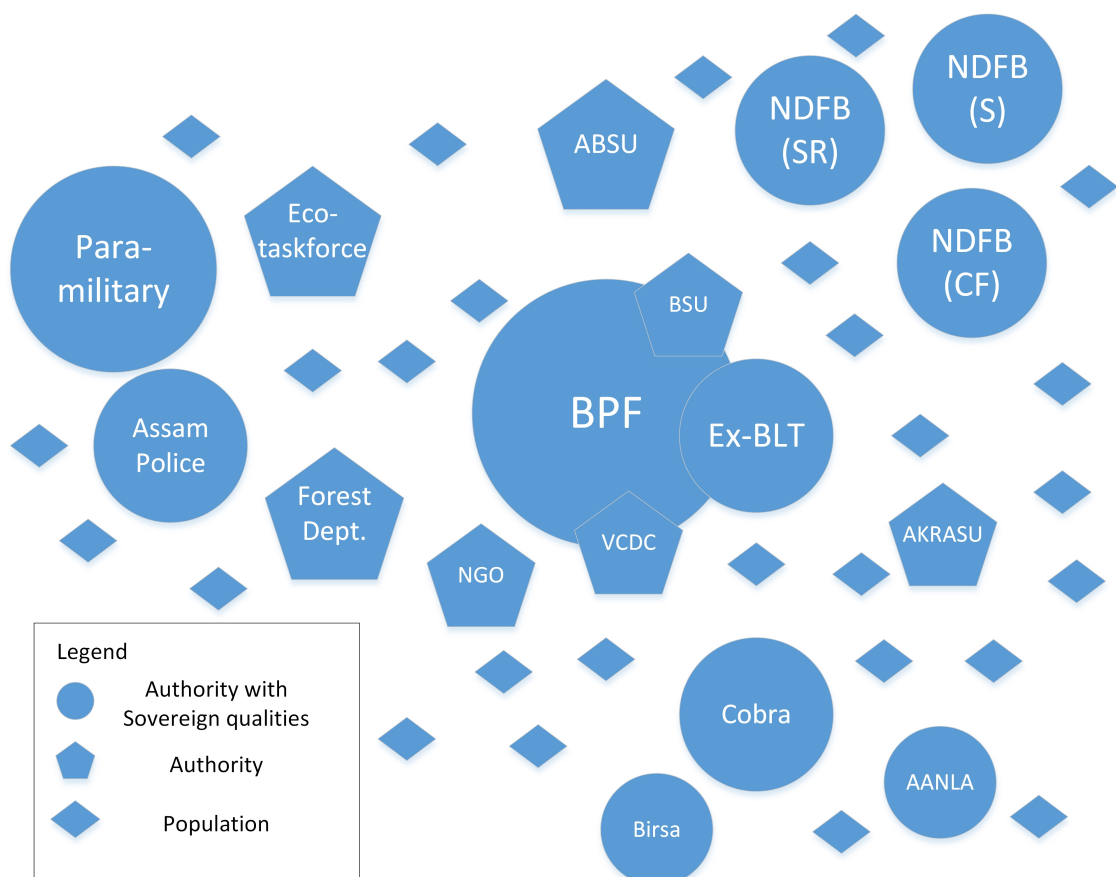


Figure 4.1: The authority structure of Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council.

continue to engage in violence beyond the state, which is central in the BTAD leadership's practices of rule. Not surprisingly, the state in the timber economy is far from a unitary actor, with elected authorities, bureaucracies like the forest department and state security forces, including police, paramilitary, and military all being differently engaged in governing the illegal timber economy. At the same time, rebel groups continue to be able to craft (unstable) territories of de facto sovereignty, allowing them to use this power to extract rents from the said economy. Drawing from and expanding on Snyder's¹² political economy of institutions of extraction framework, we situate the institution of illegal timber economy in the BTAD within a joint mode of extraction. However, and expanding on Snyder's framework, while the various actors engage in a relationship of collaboration, it remains crucial to highlight the impact of coercive relations on the institutions of extraction, emerging out of hierarchical positionalities within the institutional structure.

Finally, this article wants to move beyond the institutional structure and understand how different types of labor, in this case ethnically differentiated, are part of illegal timber's political economy. As mentioned, these different ethnic groups, which are normally thought of as in conflict, are integrated in the working of at least some aspects of the timber trade. Yet, participation in the different sections of the trade and the capacity to profit from it are largely dependent on relations of individuals and groups with the authority structure mentioned above. It must be clear that Bodo, aligned both with the BTAD leadership, with former rebel commanders, with still active rebel movements, with sections of the bureaucracy, and with powerful student groups are able to benefit most, for instance, as timber contractors. Still, this group is far from homogenous, and poorer sections of the Bodo population can be seen to be engaged in collecting firewood or cutting timber, an activity mostly associated with the most disadvantaged group: the Adivasi. Muslims, while forming the main opposition group to the Bodo, are able to bank on individual relations with Bodo contractors and, importantly, a specific skill set to overcome their lack of integration in the main structures of power and authority. As hinted at above and as we will argue in detail below, the integration of the different ethnic groups in different timber commodity chains within the larger institution of timber extraction structure is strongly mediated by violence and exclusion, which is an integral part of the negotiation of power and authority in BTAD.

This article will closely analyze the ways in which the political economy of the institution of illegal timber extraction functions in BTAD, with specific attention to the functioning of its constellation of power and authority. In doing so, we will highlight the manner in which interethnic cooperation seems to overcome narratives of interethnic strife; yet simultaneously is highly dependent on the violence which supports the authority structure. Before turning to the institution of illegal timber economy itself, we will first explicate the gestation of this contemporary authority structure. We will then in detail analyze multiple commodity chains of illegal timber extraction and trade— from

firewood and small timber for local markets, to more valuable hardwood logging for house building (according to the Assam Development Report,¹³ about 180,000 cubic meters of timber are used annually for the construction of houses in the state of Assam) and even domestic export—in relation to this constellation. We will show that while different authority structures impact on the operation of these commodity chains, the centrality of the Bodo authority makes Bodo contractors and traders the central nodes in all chains. Thus while agency is shown by non-Bodo groups, this agency is greatly burdened¹⁴ by the operation of the constellation. First, however, we will sketch the debate around institutions of extraction and illegal timber logging (in violent contexts) to embed our analysis in this larger academic field.

The data on the illegal institution of timber extraction were collected in three phases, first from February to May 2015, then from February to May 2016, and finally in August and September 2017. Informal semi-structured interviews were conducted with forest officials, villagers who were involved in the timber extraction trade, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on environment, officers of the Eco-Task Force, local politicians including the deputy chief of BTAD and the minister for forest and tourism, owners of sawmills, officials of the Assam police force, and local contractors. This was substantiated with participatory observations, visits to homes of local timber smugglers or traders, sawmills, and villages near forests from where timber was usually extracted. Most of the informal interviews were focused on understanding the *modus operandi* of the timber. Extraction chain and with the idea to delve beneath the facade of formalized institutions, groups, and networks down to the “relational substrata of the people.”¹⁵

4.1 Illegal Timber Economies in Violent Contexts

Illegal logging in Assam or elsewhere is not a recent phenomenon and has been dealt with in several strands of literature spanning from Asia to Africa and Europe to South America. A review of literature on the problem of illegal logging worldwide by Wynet Smith¹⁶ found that “most nations with significant proportion of forest coverage—tropical or non-tropical experience at least some level of illegal logging. Estimates range from 80 percent for the Brazilian Amazon, to over 90 percent for Cambodia and over 70 percent for Indonesia.” Compared to countries like China, Myanmar, Vietnam, and others that are highly integrated in the global trade in timber, Smith¹⁷ found that while India has the third largest amount of forest cover, it is only ninth in terms of industrial round wood production. Much of the wood is used for domestic consumption, and India also features as a major tropical timber importer (ITTO¹⁸ in Smith¹⁹). Much of the available data on illegal logging in India underline the level to which illegal logging in India is more of a village- level problem, rather than an issue of industrial level activity, unlike in other countries. Therefore, it becomes important to understand the local processes of illegal logging in India, where the everyday political economy of

the timber trade not only includes complex sociocultural, political, and economic organizations, but also is embedded within networks of exchange. Localized rules, established codes of conduct, and multiple hierarchies of deference and power.²⁰

The term illegal logging itself has been differently conceptualized by scholars and can be understood differently within specific social, political, and cultural contexts. Casson and Obidzinski,²¹ working on Kalimantan (Indonesia), define illegal logging as the harvesting of logs in a way that is in infringement of national laws and regulations. These laws and regulations were essentially put in place to check exploitation of mainly forest resources and also promote sustainable management of forest.²² Going by this, “illegal” may therefore comprise logging activities in “protected” areas, the logging of certain protected species of hardwood (in the case of BTAD, it refers to species that includes *sal* or *Shorea robusta*, *gamari* or *Gmelina arborea*, teak/segun or *Tectona grandis*, among others), logging outside concession boundaries (usually set according to forest regulations by the state), extraction of more than allocated harvest or firewood, removal of oversized or undersized trees as well as harvesting in areas where extraction is prohibited such as catchment areas, steep slopes, riverbanks, and national parks and reserves.²³ Conversely, Thomas Sikor and Phuc Xuan To²⁴ find the very terminology of “illegal logging” problematic since this only stresses its criminal nature, but not the way it is operated through complex political–economic networks involving multiple actors at different levels. Sikor and To²⁵ seek to transcend this statist definition of illegal and use illegal logging to “refer to a particular discourse about unwanted logging and associated social dynamics. We speak of illegal operations when we consider actual practices deemed illegal by statutory legislation.”

In our case, we use the term illegal to imply logging activities that are carried out in violation of existing forest laws. Importantly, most, if not all of our respondents involved in the timber trade, were very aware of what these violations consisted of. We also make a conscious effort to work with emic categories of what constitutes illegal logging. Many of our respondents used terms like *dui nombori* (number two) business, referring to the fraudulent or, indeed, illegal nature of the timber trade. So, it appeared that those who were embedded in the timber economy and those who observed it essentially considered it as illegal. This illegality was used in relation to violation of laws, which entailed risk of arrest, seizure of timber and vehicle, prison term, and hefty fines.

Global Commodity Chains (GCC) have also featured prominently in the discussion around the political economy of illegal timber.²⁶ Authors like Jesse Ribot,²⁷ Kevin Woods,²⁸ and Sikor and To²⁹ have traced timber from the source of extraction till the node of consumption, usually the (international) market. While we use a commodity chain framework, the chains presented focus on the local extraction to consumption chains, which sometimes are neglected in other literature.³⁰ still; the GCC literature shares many of our key concerns. Woods,³¹ for instance, use a GCC framework to

explain how timber travels from Burma and crosses the border to reach Chinese markets. Woods notes that valuable global resources like timber often originate in sites of conflict, in this case, Burma, since these regions are not well integrated into global natural resource extraction/conservation networks. In most cases, this violence is completely erased in the journey of the timber from extraction sites to consumption nodes. This provides insight into the lax relationships “between national versus insurgent economies, legal versus illegal resource extraction, (trans) national versus local resource control, and trade versus trafficking. Zones of conflict experiencing the ‘natural resource curse’ help unbundle some of these binaries,” because insurgency aids in political instability and erosion of national government authority and legitimacy. At the same time, our research shows that dividing lines cannot so easily be drawn between state and insurgents when it comes to timber logging in conflict zones. Moreover, Woods³² elucidates in much detail the various elements that sustain this transnational logging trade, from trans border patron–client relationships, transnational alliance capital, and international consumer desires, all pervading the border.

While not using a GCC framework, Phillippe Le Billon’s³³ work corroborates many of these insights. Based on long-term fieldwork on illegal logging in Cambodia, he finds that the case of state ban on logging is a classic example of a “conflict between a central authority trying to project its control and power over peripheral regions by addressing issues of national security, political dissidence, and illegal trading, and a border population that is better off with close political, social, economic, and cultural interaction across borders.” The wider political economy of conflict scholarship has accentuated that war is less about the breakdown of political and economic relations; rather, it is about their reordering and transformation.³⁴ this transformative quality of war is often manifested through opportunities in the illegal economy. Although somewhat over- stated in the debate around greed as the primary driver of conflict,³⁵ conflict and war economies, in particular, can provide opportunities for the emergence of alternative systems of profit and clientelism.³⁶ Warfare functions as an “instrument of enterprise” and “violence as a mode of accumulation.”³⁷ Still, as Jonathan Goodhand has shown, these “war economies” often should be better conceptualized as local “coping economies.” What our case shows is that a simple equation between war and illegal timber extraction is far too simplistic, as illegal logging has continued after a peace agreement with some sort of democratic transition. Moreover, as Snyder’s institutions of extraction framework highlights simple dichotomies between state and rebel might not be tenable.

Before we turn to the case of BTAD, the environmental cost of resource extraction in these conflict settings has to be mentioned. We do not discount the importance and existence of discourses around conservation and forest management practices and concerns, especially seen in the works of Robbins et al.³⁸ on the illicit use of resources within wildlife conservation sites or Sivaramakrishnan’s work³⁹ on colonial forestry and forestland grabs, specifically in West Bengal. However, within the

scope of this article, we want to present a grounded understanding of an illegal timber economy to comprehend how the proliferation of multiple yet hierarchically structured sovereign actors have harnessed the economic opportunities that emerged within this institution as part of recurrent ethnic conflicts. We seek to understand how these various sovereigns are embedded within the commodity chain (we use a very local commodity chain framework) and interact with each other as well as local villagers and consumers.

4.2 The Constellation of Authority and Power in BTAD: (ex-)Rebels, the Indian State, and the (ex-)Rebel-State

The constellation of power and authority of BTAD is quite complex (see Figure 4.1). This, of course, is a reflection of the complex, but also violent history of the gestation toward the current BTAD and to the resistance accompanying its formation. As Figure 4.1 also shows, different authorities and power holders have a different weight, partly the result of their (territorial) scope to engage in violence, and thus a different ability to impact on the whole of the constellation. Populations living in BTAD are impacted upon differently by different sources of power and authority, often depending on their degrees of affinity to them. Again, this closeness is often territorial (see also below), but can also be due to the ethnic background of a specific population. Before turning toward its operation in the illegal timber economy, let us now shortly introduce the historical gestation of the contemporary constellation.

4.3 Historical Background

Although Bodo mobilization for a greater autonomy had already emerged in the 1960s with the organization of the Plain Tribals Council of Assam, the struggle for a separate state of Bodoland gained momentum after the participation in the anti-foreigner Assam Movement left activists disappointed with the benefits accruing to the Bodo Community. Through the 1980s, and under the leadership of the All Bodo Student's Union (ABSU), a crucial authority to date, the struggle for the creation of Bodoland took shape. Dominance at this stage was still clearly located in the Indian state, including the State of Assam. However, from the end of the 1980s, violent opposition emerged, and certainly after the organization of the Bodo Security Force (BSF) the authority structure started to shift. Still, it would only be after a first memorandum of understanding for the creation of a Bodo Administrative Council (BAC) between the Government of India, the Government of Assam, and leading Bodo organizations, including ABSU in 1993, failed to assuage grievances within particular sections that the current constellation of power and authority started to take shape.

Most crucial for the formation of this was the organization of the BLT in 1996, together with their rival National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) that was formed by the members of BSF rejecting the BAC. Both these organizations deployed violence not only against Bengali Muslims but also against most other non-Bodo communities including Adivasi (mainly Santhal) as well as Koch-Rajbongshi and Nepali. This led to a further deployment of both military and paramilitary forces in the region, but also to the massive displacement of the population, a scenario, which would continue in the region. Still, and certainly in the massive forest areas near the border with Bhutan, the rebel movements were able to carve out a (often overlapping) de facto sovereign space, in which they to a large degree were able to monopolize means of violence. Moreover, the attacks against Adivasi led to the formation of the Adivasi Cobra Force (ACF or COBRA) in 1996 to protect Adivasi against Bodo attacks. While much less powerful, they still hold some measure of (violent) territorial control, particularly in Adivasi-dominated areas. The All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA) also founded in 1996 has some presence in Adivasi-dominated areas of BTAD, although they are a less organized group, with its main operational zone in eastern Assam. Finally, another, smaller outfit operates under the name of Birsa, referring to Birsa Munda, the leader of the nineteenth-century Munda resistance (and millenarian) movement against British domination in current-day Bihar and Jharkhand.

The final and crucial shift in the authority structure took place in 2003, which led to the creation of BTC. As such, the emergent political order clearly has its roots in violence. The council operates largely independent from the state government and comprises four districts (Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, and Udalguri), known together as BTAD. Hagrama Mohilary, leader of the BLT, has since Headed the council and has become the head of the political party incarnation of the BLT: The Bodo People's Front (BPF). Mohilary, along with the ruling Bodo elites leading the BPF, has overtime emerged as the main centrifugal power in BTAD (leading us to position BPF, and not the council as such, within the constellation). The power that Mohilary exerts over the council and within the larger political coalition in Assam clearly has granted him the status of a sovereign personified. Not having turned in their weapons, cadres of the BPF and what is known as ex-BLT still wield considerable armed powers.

This is important, as the Bodo Accord did not end the clashes on ethnic lines. Major rounds of attacks on Muslims in 1993 were repeated in 2008, 2012, and 2014. Similarly, major attacks on Adivasis occurred not only in pre-Accord 1996 and 1998 but also in 2014. All these attacks led to hundreds of deaths. While the brunt of these attacks has been on the non-Bodo population—important sections of which have been relocated to IDP camps—limited retaliation against Bodos have also led to a continued sense of insecurity within the Bodo populations, looking for armed protection. The ongoing violence has also led to a continued presence of (para) military forces, of

which the most important are the Border Security Forces (BSF), Sashastra Seema Bal, the Indian Army, the Assam Rifles, and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police. They lead anti-insurgency operations against different groups of armed militants. Both the counterinsurgency operations and the formation of BTC also led to the emergence of different factions within NDFB, one of which has surrendered, one, which is under a ceasefire, and finally one that is still fully active. Maybe surprisingly in the context of Northeast India, the paramilitary forces continue to operate with a degree of legitimacy, while most communities also look at one of the (ex-) rebel movements for protection, although often unsuccessful.

To summarize, while in earlier phases the Indian state has tried to violently suppress movement for Bodo autonomy, consequently, through the Bodo Accord, it has delegated (sovereign) power to the party-political incarnation of the BLT. This placed a constitutionalized and democratically legitimized powers within the hands of a particular Bodo elite (and Hagrama Mohilary) but also has fostered the dominance of Bodos in general.

This is further supported by the ongoing presence of the various factions of the NDFB and ex-BLT who have not surrendered their weapons. The gravitational center in the constellation is thus clearly controlled by Bodo groups. The counterweight presented through the paramilitary and to a lesser extent Assam police is often limited in time and place. Similarly, COBRA and AANLA rebel groups are territorially bounded. The resulting constellation of power and authority and the way that different groups are able to deploy violence is crucial to understand the functioning of the illegal timber economy. Moreover, while many groups are involved in some section of the timber industry, the enmity between different sources of power and authority—and particularly, paramilitary and armed militants—can also open up interstices that are exploited by those in the timber economy.

4.4 The Travels of the Illegal Timber Economy: From Firewood to High Value Logging

We distinguish three different types of illegal timber trade, each scaling up, both with regard to the value of timber involved and the power and authority of the actors engaged in it. The three types are firewood, contracted timber for popular building and furniture making purposes, and mafia-style or syndicate-run timber trade for local elites, including Member of the Council Legislative Assembly, MLAs, and others that further transport toward Dhubri, Barpeta, Bongaigaon up to West Bengal. Our focus lies predominantly on the second layer, with the two others playing particular roles within the illegal timber economy. We will first provide the basic setup of each commodity chain, after which we will analyze in more detail the role of power and authority structures helping to shape the chain(s) (see Figure 4.2).

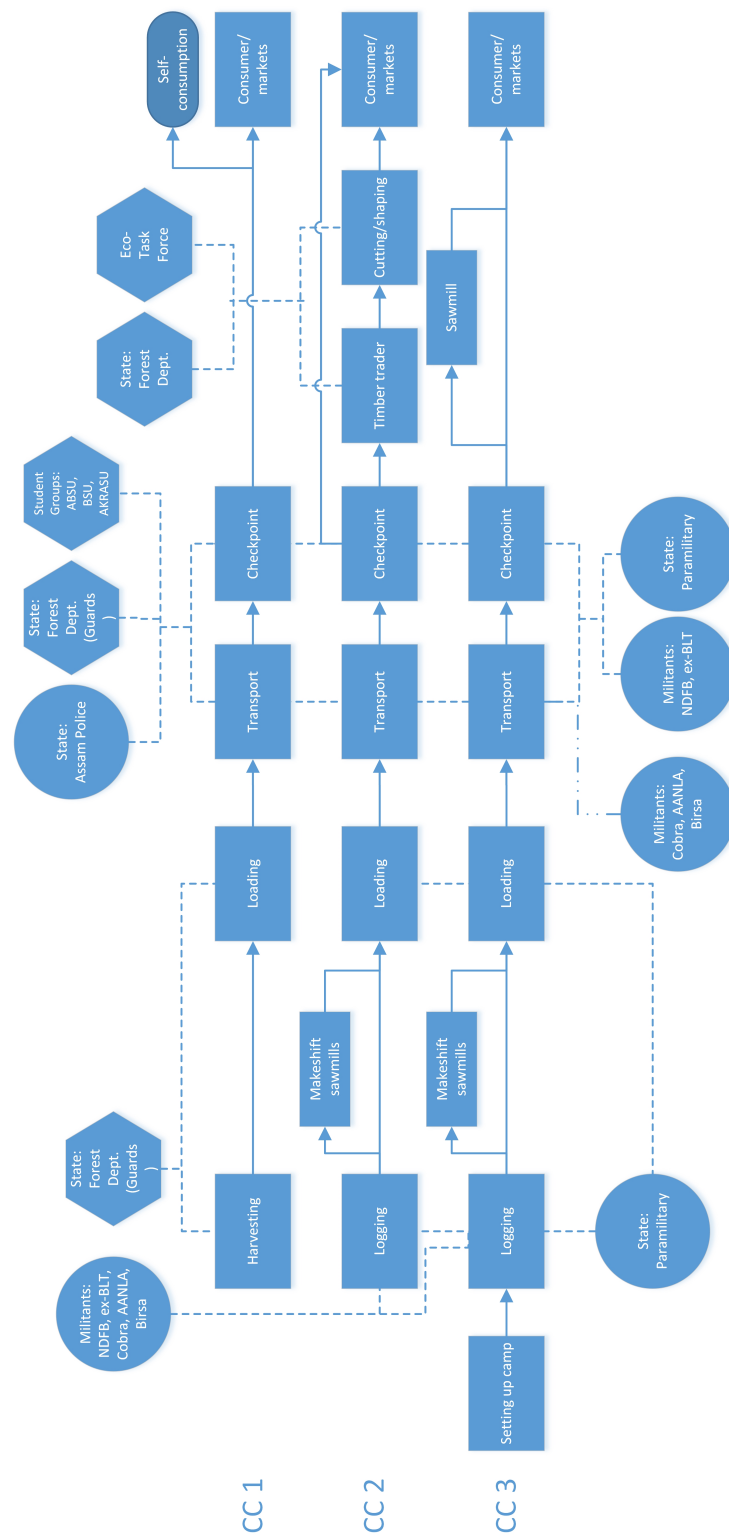


Figure 4.2: Timber commodity chains in Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Council.

As stated above, we use a more localized version of commodity chain analysis as opposed to a GCC to show how timber travels from the site of extraction to the nodes of consumption but in a limited domestic and even regional geographical area. To be precise, from the forests in Kokrajhar district, especially within the Haltugaon division up to the towns of Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, and neighboring districts of Dhubri and Barpeta. This type of a micro approach becomes important since we seek to show how the commodity, that is, timber, locally referred to as “golai” links the different sites of extraction, actors, authorities, and sovereigns through often-organized sets of networks. Moreover, in the case we discuss, extraction and consumption often take place in a local arena, with social relations often directly connecting those organizing extraction and those consuming the finished timber. This actor-centric focus at each commodity chain node not only reveals the political relations tied to the resource but also sheds a lot of light on existing interactions and power relations among the actors themselves. We thereby transcend the politics of resource extraction to have a more nuanced understanding of interethnic, unequal relationships of exchange characterizing the local commodity chain.

The first type is fairly straightforward (Figure 4.2: commodity chain 1 [CC1]). In this, woodcutters would enter the forest and cut a cart or bicycle load of timber. Woodcutters would mostly be Adivasi, although Bodo also engage in this practice. The woodcutters mostly transport the firewood themselves to the local markets where they sell directly to the consumers at about 150–300 rupees (all amounts in 2015 (INR prices) per cycle load (depending on the size, quantity, and quality of timber), which mostly consist of either local villagers and sometimes also middle-class and lower-middle class consumers from Kokrajhar town. According to 2001 Census data, around 75.9 percent of the households in Assam use firewood for cooking. Sometimes, the firewood is also used for the woodcutter’s household consumption. According to Assam Forest Policy,⁴⁰ villagers living around the fringes of the forest are allowed to collect dried up tree branches, twigs, or cut wood from trees that have naturally fallen, all for self-consumption. Compliance with these rules is at the discretion of the forest department. However, they are not legally allowed to make profits by selling this wood and neither are they allowed to cut trees in order to get firewood. In interviews, we were told, “since these are poor people, we cut them some slack. Even they have to live. We are okay as long as they do not destroy the forest or engage with and aid timber smugglers” (conversation with a high-level forest official).

The second type involves the most complex set of relations (Figure 4.2: CC2) and engages the full array of the ethnic communities involved, as well as the full constellation of power and authority in the area. Whoever needs timber (mostly sal but also *lali*, *segun*, *teetachapa*, *shirish*, and *gamari*) to construct a house in or around the main towns of Kokrajhar, Chirang, or Bongaigaon, first contacts a timber smuggler or contractor. These timber contractors are in most cases Bodo and often have

a history in a rebel movement, as former BLT or former NDFB cadres or enjoy the patronage of a more powerful authority within the extraction economy. In this case, the timber is delivered to the house of the consumer where it is processed, or, in other cases, the Bodo contractors delivers the logs to Muslim traders for sawing and processing purposes. These Muslim traders are also directly contacted for *golai*, and they order it through their Bodo networks. After processing, they are also responsible for delivering it to the consumers. Therefore, Muslim traders emerge as a vital link in the commodity chain. Respondents stated that it was important to know the contractor or trader personally to not risk getting inferior quality timber. Usually, Bodo contractors were in charge of procuring logs. Logs were sourced from the forest and the trees were felled usually by Adivasi laborers, but sometimes also by Bodo youth from nearby villages. Some of the timber would be roughly cut up in makeshift sawmills inside the forest, with the bulk being directly loaded on *thelas* (wooden carts) usually fitted with large truck tires for transport. These carts have to be pulled and pushed by six to seven persons, usually also Adivasi, who received around INR 700 each. Carts are mostly organized in processions with an SUV (the Mahindra Scorpio being particularly popular) going ahead to check whether the road is free. Still, a number of checkpoints, both of forest departments and police, are to be negotiated. Important in this regard is whether the timber has to be delivered “*highway ke iss par aur us par*,” to the north or the south of the highway, as crossing the highway entails more risks and possibly more payments on the way. This first part of the trade takes place at night (from around 1 a.m. till 5 a.m., before the sun rises). In almost all cases, the logs are transported to Muslim villages, since they are considered to have the necessary skills to saw the logs into usable timber. Some consumers, almost all Bodo, and especially those with some form of economic and political leverage (NGO personal, youth leaders, and local businessmen) would get the timber delivered directly to their houses. A Muslim artisan would then be called to saw and process the timber on site.

However, the norm seemed to be that the wood is delivered to a Muslim timber trader who organizes (Muslim) labor to cut the logs. After the logs are cut and sawed according to the demands of the customers, risks generally decrease as a legal grey zone is exploited. While possession of timber in the form of rough planks is a crime, finished timber produce is not considered illegal, with the processed logs taking up an intermediate position. The finished timber is sometimes directly delivered to clients and households, but also to markets or furniture shops that further process the timber. It should be mentioned that the demand for wooden furniture is very high, as it is not only durable but also a status symbol. Most respondents who bought timber illegally did so because it is easier and cheaper to procure timber in the “black” market. The size of one piece of *golai* can easily measure up to 50–60 cft or cubic feet. On an average, it is INR 1,000 cheaper per *golai* when bought illegally, and a timber smuggler can profit up to 2,000 INR per *golai*.

The third type (Figure 4.2: CC3) is quite similar to the second type. Yet the value of the timber and the power of the people involved (most importantly as clients) distinguish it from the relative petty timber trade discussed above (and makes it also more difficult to research in detail). Respondents, including forest rangers, local journalists, NGO workers, research assistants from the Bodo community, Bodo, Adivasi and Muslim student union leaders/members, and even some villagers who often see truckloads of timber leaving the forest describe it as involving a timber mafia or syndicate. Clients in this trade are the power holders in BTAD, including ministers, who source it for the construction of their houses. This trade involved higher members of the bureaucracy and the forest department. Often, this timber would pass through official sawmills, also operated by friends and aides of the BTAD leadership where it could be mixed in with timber that was seized and auctioned by the forest department (see below), or that was illegally sold to contractors by forest department officials directly. While part of this timber is for local consumption, it is also smuggled using the river. There are two main river routes both originating in Bhutan. The first one uses timber sourced in the Chirang reserved forest on the Indo-Bhutan border. It is then tied to inner tire tubes and floated on the Sarphang (name in Bhutan), known as Saralbhang in India. This takes the name of Sankosh in Jharbari, flows into Dhubri and subsequently to West Bengal and Bangladesh. The second route comprises of the part of the Aai River originating in Bhutan and flowing to Chirang district. It then flows via Goalpara into the Brahmaputra and is then floated upriver to Guwahati. At several points, the floated timber can hit the shore to be collected by timber traders, after which they follow the same trajectory as of those transported through trucks and carts.

When asked about this third layer, an ex-timber dealer (Muslim) who now works as a political entrepreneur for Muslims but also maintains a good relationship with the ruling BPF said, “I went to the house of a high level politician and happened to have a look at his *godown* [warehouse] where I saw huge stacks of Sal. I asked his party men what this was for and they said, the leader was planning to construct a new house.” To this, my respondent added, “we do not supply timber to these guys, they have enough power and channels to source it themselves.”

Finally, it should be mentioned that the district of Kokrajhar has only one legal sawmill in the town of Kokrajhar itself. The legal way to obtain timber is through the Forest Department. Contractors, who are in need of timber for public works, for example, construction or renovation works for various government departments of the BTAD, can get the timber through a permit system. According to the permit system, these contractors have to apply to the Council Head of Forests. The Council Head then forwards this request to the concerned Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) and the DFO issues the permit to the contractor. Any timber that is left is then auctioned to legal sawmills or timber dealers after which the forest department marks the timber and issues a permit. All timber sold in official sawmills must be licensed timber obtained through this permit system. Once the

trader obtains the permit, he or she can get the timber.⁴¹ A forest department officer said that the BTAD forest department annually generates about 50–60 million INR from the sale of seized timber. However, another senior forest official stated, “Since 2009 there has been no auction of timber in BTAD.” Other sources revealed that the loophole provided by the permit system is mostly used, also for nonpublic purposes.

4.5 (Unequal) Relations of Exchange: Power, Authority, and Control over the Timber Trade

As the text above already mentions and Figure 4.2 shows, many authorities and power holders engage in the timber economy. As such, the timber economy is not characterized by a lack of regulation, but rather by an excess of it. While a number of authorities try to curtail the trade in timber, most are engaged in regulating (part of) the trade, and most importantly in taxing the timber economy (or extracting rents if one would prefer that terminology, although tax or fees emerged as the emic category during interviews). As will be shown below, while the threat of violence is omnipresent and backs the capacity for taxation, lethal violence is not often used directly in connection to the trade. Moreover, the connections of some actors, and, in particular, the contractors, to the dominant power holders in the area, result in highly unequal relations of exchange. Finally, while the regulatory excess does clearly not incapacitate the timber trade, the real booms are associated with periods with particular types of violent conflict, drawing a number of actors away from regulating or curtailing the trade.

4.6 Regulatory Excess: Taxation, Protection, and Seizure

Given the high number of authority and power structures within the timber economy, we argue that the timber commodity chain is rather characterized by regularity excess⁴² (who argues for African sovereign excess rather than the absence of power, connection, and capital), than by an absence of regulation. The full gambit of the constellation of power and authority in BTAD engages in some stage of the commodity chain. Of course, given the difference of value between the different chains, involvement varied quite substantially. Moreover, and this will be treated in a later section, the specific rationalities of engagement would also differentially affect different groups in the timber economy.

The firewood collectors, given the limited value they represent, were relatively less affected. Still, at the time of collecting or harvesting firewood, they would have to pay local forest guards. This allowed them some leeway in the exact application of the forest law. Our respondents put that

they only collect firewood and do not fell trees. “We sometimes cut branches of trees but not big logs. For one bicycle load of firewood, we usually pay INR 20–50 to the forest guard otherwise he confiscates our cycles.” Forest rangers and guards use the bribe mechanism to exert authority. Given the limited value, we found no evidence of rebel movements taxing this part of the economy. However, the presence of rebel movements would sometimes restrict who would be able to collect firewood. Certainly, at times of tension, the returns for collecting firewood were sometimes not worth the risk of running into a rebel group associated with a rival ethnic group. A visit to an Adivasi relief camp in the aftermath of the 2014 violence between Bodo and Adivasi revealed that after the episode of violence, the Adivasis had lost access to the forest since they were too scared to go inside for the fear of encountering Bodo. A similar, but reverse situation was observed in a Bodo village, where the Bodo had temporarily stopped going into the forest for fear of Adivasi.⁴³

When transporting the firewood to the market, firewood collectors would again have to pay informal taxes or contributions to a number of authorities and power holders. The common practice was to throw a log of wood when passing the offices of the forest department, the police, and student groups, including ABSU, BSU [Bodoland Students Union], and AKRASU [All Assam Koch Rajbongshi Students Union]. This would happen against the threat of (nonlethal) violence.

Unlike this more limited form of taxation, in which the seizure of firewood was not common, the timber trade proper (CC2) would entail more risks. Given that the returns were also much larger, many more authority structures were firmly integrated in operation of the trade, while some were active in trying to curtail it. A formidable part of the necessary capital was spent on “taxes” or “bribes”—often referred to as “line tax” or “line fees,” paid by timber traders and this was said to have multiplied in recent times, indeed, due to an over proliferation of authorities, as a result of regulatory excess. To and Sikor⁴⁴ also found, in their work on timber logging in Cambodia, that those directly engaged in the timber trade are likely to be embedded in wider networks involving a further variety of actors beyond the point of extraction. The wider these networks, so is the regulatory excess and resulting nodes of taxation. One former timber dealer named Raheem⁴⁵ explained this situation: “I was in this timber business for seven years but over the years more and more authorities have come up who want a cut and my profits have continued to diminish. So I have decided to exit.” Raheem’s statement resonated with that of a Muslim timber dealer who said that on an average he paid INR 5,000 on taxes each month.

As can be seen in Figure 4.2, the authorities to whom these taxes commonly accrued to be the Assam Police, the forest department, the Border Roads Task Force, ABSU, AAKRASU, NDFB, and ex-BLT. Since part of the fieldwork was conducted right after the ethnic violence of 2014, the COBRA and AANLA forces had temporarily retreated and their place had been taken over by the AAKRASU. We also found evidence that these authorities also negotiated among themselves

regarding the amount of taxes to be levied on their respective ethnic communities. This was observed in a tea stall inside a forest when an NDFB militant said to a COBRA militant, “we charge INR 150 from the Adivasi so you should not be imposing more tax on the Bodo.” These different authorities and power holders used their territorialized power to extract these taxes and bribes at particular nodes in the chain. Some of the militants were more powerful in and near the forest areas, while police operated around the highway. (Lethal) violence while not common was always a possibility and was certainly used to back territorial claims. According to a senior police officer, which of course had his reasons to stress, “The militants and timber smugglers are hand in gloves,” “the militants do not hesitate to kill the timber smuggler if their transaction conditions are not satisfied.”

A blame game appeared apparent between the Police Department and the Department of Forest. Most senior police officials accused the lackadaisical attitude of the forest department, which according to this one official was actually perpetuating the timber trade. On the other hand, forest officials accused the police of taking bribes from timber smugglers and were disappointed that most of the forest guest houses had been allocated to the army and now acted as army bases to maintain patrol over conflict affected villages.

While police and forest department were commonly said to be part of the timber economy (although at some points also operating against it), the paramilitary forces mostly made up of nonlocal personal were active in curtailing the trade. Given that they, like the militants, often operated inside the forest allowed them to monitor the trade. While they would normally not operate against the timber trade directly, they would tip off the forest department, which would then (be forced to) conduct a raid. There, the forest department, but also the Eco-Task Force, could conduct raids. The latter actor is particularly interesting as it consists of former army personnel (with some regulars as a core), and is raised for the “ecological restoration of terrains, rendered difficult due to either severe degradation or remote location or difficult law and order situation.”⁴⁶ Given that they also worked in the forest areas, they would also tip the forest department about timber activity. The Forest Department, however, argued that they only had limited means to curtail the timber trade. A high-level forest official explained:

We seize timber inside the forest, and conduct forest raids but it is an expensive operation, which requires a lot of resources and also the help of army and state police. Once the trucks leave the forest it is impossible for us to seize, since we get calls from ex-BLTs, politicians, etc. who put pressure on us to release the trucks [...] as soon as the truck leaves the forest, the stake holders increase and it becomes difficult to seize.

Another forest official further highlighted that it is not only the over ground actors that would interfere in the seizing activities: “we do not usually seize timber inside the forest since we have been threatened by the NDFB. As you can see several forest check booths inside are empty because

it is dangerous especially with counterinsurgency operations going on. There have been cases in the past where forest guards have been attacked by militants in the forest.”

The latter part of his statement becomes all the more relevant when we look at the third commodity chain. As said, it was difficult to get clear-cut information on this part of the timber economy. While it partly operates like the second chain, the scale and value of the timber sources and the consumers it is targeting would lead to lesser involvement of the lower rungs of the different relevant departments. Pressure would be put directly on the higher branches of the forest and police departments to limit the involvement of these actors. It remains unclear to what extent both rebel movement and paramilitary are involved in the trade. While we have indications that NDFB and ex-BLT are facilitating the trade and extract taxes, the role of the paramilitary is even more difficult to ascertain. It remains unclear whether the BTAD-specific power networks are strong enough to penetrate the paramilitary.

4.7 Violence and the Timber Economy

While the previous section clearly shows the way that regulatory excess saturates the timber economy, to the point where some of the timber contractors move out of the trade, the overlapping presence of many claimants of power and authority also provides opportunities in the timber economy. While this sometimes worked in favor of those trying to curtail the economy—as when the NDFB informed the DFO that members of their rival ex-BLT were extracting timber—these overlaps and confrontations between authorities often allow for a flourishing of the timber economy.

Given the close cooperation between the different ethnic groups in the trade, one would expect that moments of violence would disrupt the trade. However, and depending on the way that different authorities align and confront each other during these violent episodes, violence can provide an interstitial space where the regulatory excess becomes reduced. While we have already mentioned that during periods of conflict Adivasi or Bodo villagers are not too keen on entering the forest depending on which rebel movement might be present, in discussions with forest officials, NGO personnel, and officials of the Assam Police, it became clear that during times of conflict the timber trade was usually at its peak due to the withdrawal of certain armed actors. During counterinsurgency operations, the militants usually left the forests and fled across the borders into Bhutan. The forest guards and rangers also mostly left their posts, with paramilitary often engaged in combating militants rather than catching timber smugglers. This usually lifted existing patterns of territorial control. The timber “syndicate” exploited this.

Also, and this seems to go directly against the dominant narratives of never-ending ethnic conflict, it was not only paramilitary operations which facilitated the trade. Likewise, when ethnic violence occurred in a different part of BTAD, this could benefit the timber economy. Ethnic clashes would draw away the paramilitary and police, making the puzzle slightly less complicated. In some cases,

rebel movements would also be drawn away to participate in the violence (either actively or as a protection force). This would again lift the normal patterns of territorial control and allow the trade to exploit this. While this would, of course, depend on the fear of a spillover of the violence to the timber extracting communities, it remains hard to ascertain how such calculations are made.

In contrast, during elections, the timber economy faced a draught due to the presence of additional security forces and checkpoints, which heightened risks. Since data for this article were collected during the BTAD council and Assam Assembly elections, interviews with both Bodo and Muslim traders revealed, “business is down now because of elections. There is too much security and we cannot extract as much timber as during times of conflict or otherwise.” Elections are also the times when usually authorities like the army, paramilitary, and police took control of the forest and heightened counterinsurgency operations so as to avoid any form of electoral violence.

4.8 Coping Economies and Unequal Relations of Exchange

From the previous sections, it becomes possible to outline three types of relationships of exchange in the commodity chains: one between the different groups of laborers involved in the commodity chain; one between these groups and the power and authority structures; and finally between the various power and authority holders themselves. When we delve deeper into these three relationships of exchange, the inequalities between the different actors and groups become apparent. Moreover, it highlights a particular group that up to now has remained in the background: the BTAD leadership, including most centrally the BPF and its leader Hagrama Mohilary (which we indicated to be the central sovereign body in Figure 4.1). The absence of the latter in Figure 4.2 can be attributed to two seemingly contradictory elements. First, the BPF leadership is omnipresent in all stages of the trade, and secondly, this omnipresence is hard to locate as they are not engaged directly in, (the taxation of) the trade. As such, the trade is dependent on their approval, while they are directly engaged in its operation (except as consumers). It is not surprising, therefore, that most big constructions in Kokrajhar town like hotels, guesthouses, hospitals, showrooms, and petrol pumps are owned by Mohilary himself, his relatives, or one of his close aides. Until about 2016, a good friend of Mohilary was running the only licensed sawmill in Kokrajhar. Moreover, a number of other authorities and power holders are partly dependent on BPF patronage. This includes ex-BLT, BSU, forest department, and district administration, among others. This is reflective of the all-pervasive nature of control (not only physical but also psychological) exercised by Mohilary and his BPF aides.

Analyzing the role of the ethnic background of the different actors in the chain, the benefits are usually tilted in the favor of (elite and influential) Bodo. This ethnic community holds most positions within different crucial authority structures, including the BPF and active/ex militants, but

also in central authority structures, including the forest department and different student groups. While Adivasi labor is crucial in the first stages of the chain, and Muslim knowhow is crucial for the cutting of the raw timber, it is the Bodo contractors, often with a background in a rebel movement or a close relation to *the chief*, which control all the interactions between the different groups. They are able to use their (Bodo) social networks, both in the administration and in the executive leadership to smoothen and make possible the timber trade and allow them to gather the necessary capital to engage in the trade. Importantly, while Adivasi rebel movements like COBRA, AANLA, or Birsas were present and were able to extract taxes from the timber economy, Bodo militant, including NDFB and (ex-)BLT controlled larger swaths of forest land. Therefore, although it may appear that the different ethnic groups share a relationship of collaboration against the backdrop of bitter ethnic violence, this relationship is not equal socially, economically, or politically. As such, the integration of different ethnic communities in the illegal timber economy should not be thought of as having potential to integrate across ethnic groups and overcome the clear-cut ethnic divisions in the area. We observed that in most cases the relationship was contained to the economic sphere without having a spillover effect on everyday social or even political interactions. The second phase of data for this article was, for instance, gathered during the time of Assam State Assembly elections. In this context, it was found, during an interview with a local Muslim timber dealer, that while in front of his Bodo suppliers he “pretended” that he and his co-villagers would vote for the ruling BPF party, as soon as the Bodo men had left, the trader told us that they would definitely vote for a Muslim party.⁴⁷

When compared to Adivasi laborers, the Muslim timber traders were clearly better off. Because of their distance from the nodes of extraction itself, they usually enjoyed a fairly lax regime in terms of risks and also possessed access to capital to procure and process timber. Still, a visit to the home of a Muslim timber trader revealed that he had to fully depend on Bodo suppliers to deliver the big logs to his home for further sawing and supply, as well as for the costumers who mostly engaged a Bodo contractor for their supply. On the day of visit, we also met the Bodo suppliers and when asked about them, the Muslim trader whispered, “these boys are ex-NDFB, look at him without a hand and an eye. He lost it in a blast.” Although it is hard to ascertain the truth of this information, the fear in the eyes of this Muslim trader was apparent. The village itself had also been completely gutted by Bodo, most likely from neighboring villages during an earlier episode of ethnic violence in 2012. Given that Muslim and Adivasi were mostly at the receiving end of the violence, one could think that amicable relations might develop between these groups as part of their engagement in the timber trade. However, given their relatively different class background and the fact that their relation was fully mediated by Bodo contractors, we found no traces of such emergent relationship.

The Adivasis, despite having the closest physical proximity to the forest, could be said to have the

least control over the trade. They were either engaged in firewood collection or worked as laborers to fell the trees and to transport the timber. Due to a lack of capital, but also the necessary networks, they were mostly not part of procurement or processing. As some of the Adivasi firewood collectors stated: “We do see syndicates operating inside the forest and militants, but we do not meddle with them since what they are doing requires capital and is all part of the black market.” Except for some forest areas that are claimed to be a hotbed of Adivasi militants like the COBRA, AANLA, or Birsā, the Adivasi did have limited control over forest areas. Moreover, in recent times, most of these militant groups have surrendered their weapons, which further weakened the Adivasi access to powerful patrons.⁴⁸ Still, a Forest Ranger argued: “Santhals [one of the main Adivasi groups] are the main destroyer of forest since they aid timber smugglers.”

This indicates that access to forest profits itself is dependent on one’s embeddedness within social and political networks. The unequal power relations within the commodity chains were also reflected in terms of economic returns. Let us give some indication based on the petty timber trade. We already mentioned that an Adivasi gets about INR 500–700 for pulling a cartload of timber. It has to be kept in mind that for most of these Adivasis, this was an irregular source of employment. When it comes to the costs associated with the commodity itself, the Muslim trader paid about INR 400–450 per cft to the Bodo contractor. The timber that lay in front of me in one of my visits to a Muslim trader’s house was worth about INR 54,000 and measured around 75 cft. The timber was clearly marked with “do not take,” which indicated that it was sourced from timber seized by the forest department. The Muslim trader would have to pay an additional cost to cover taxes or bribes that were paid on the way. Besides, he would also pay labor costs for sawing at about INR 100 per cft. He could then sell the sawed timber to a customer for about INR 1,000–1,500 per cft, depending on the social and economic status of the client. According to the son of this particular timber dealer, “in a good month, we can make up to INR 25,000.” It has to be kept in mind that Bodo contractors could make over INR 50,000 for those involved in the petty timber trade, whereas those involved in a more syndicate or mafia-type trade could earn “lakhs” (meaning anything over INR 100,000; interview with an experienced local journalist).

While the above indicates that good profits continue to be made within the timber economy, it is necessary to state that for many actors, if not for most, it continues to be not much more than a coping economy. According to a high-level police official, “more than sixty per cent of the rural population engages in one or the other form of timber trade.” This is most apparent for the Adivasis. They engage in firewood collection and can be found at the lower rungs of the timber trade, where they work as laborers inside the forest and for transport. Moreover, while the Muslim trader is able to work for profit, his aides, while skilled, do not benefit similarly. Finally, while Bodo contractors operate the chain, and Bodo elites benefit, in the form of bribes, taxes, or as consumers. A majority

of Bodos remains excluded from these benefits. As such, while this article might have given the impression of a full-fledged Bodo dominance, for many, Bodo firewood collection remains a part of their everyday coping strategies. And some Bodo youth take up a similar position as the Adivasi, also being engaged in the felling of trees. As such, while ethnic boundaries and the ways these are maintained are crucial in understanding the political economy of BTAD, we should not turn a blind eye to class based lines of distinctions which run through the different ethnic communities.

4.9 Conclusion: Everyday Timber Extraction Consumption

In 2012, on World environment day, the forest department conducted a drawing competition in a forest village, that is, a hot spot for timber extraction. The theme of the competition was “bon” [forest]. Almost all the children drew trees being cut, and timber/logs being carried out in carts. (Interview with a high-level forest official)

This example shows how deeply the economy of timber extraction is embedded in the “everyday” of the community who are an essential part of our timber constellation. For them, extraction of forest resources like timber was almost a natural source of livelihood. Although they knew it was illegal and, in recent times, were also aware of the fast depletion of forest cover, they observed on a daily basis “truck and cart loads of timber being taken out of the forest” (interview with an Adivasi village headmen living in proximity to a fringe forest village). As stated above, in our commodity chain, the extractor and the consumer often know each other and, unlike in GCC, the consumer in our case exactly knows where the timber is being sourced. This led us to interview several consumers (who are often absent in GCC framework analysis). Most of these consumers were student leaders, local politicians, and NGO personal who, for instance (slightly ironically), organized the annual World Environment Day events by planting saplings and spreading awareness, but at the same time used illegal timber to build their homes. It appeared as a situation of moral duality where cutting trees was unacceptable but using timber cut from this very tree was acceptable. As long as one was not directly involved in extraction processes, it was easy to blame the syndicate, “the Muslim traders,” and the “woodcutters” for the loss of forest.

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5 Rural Informalities and Forest Squatters in the Reserved Forests of Assam, India

Dutta, A. (2018). Rural informalities and forest squatters in the reserved forests of Assam, India. *Critical Asian Studies*, 1-22.

Me: “Will you sell me some of your land, since you say you have over fifteen bighas¹ of land?”

Jogeswar Lakra²: “Why do you have to buy land from me? Look around (pointing to vast stretches of forestland) there is mela maati (abundance of land). Go and dokhol some!”

Abstract

It has now been well established that forests in South Asia are postcolonial political zones. In Assam, in northeast India this was accomplished through the colonial project of converting jungles into Reserved Forests. Using the politics of *dokhol*, which translates to grab or occupy by force, as an entry point, I interrogate the comparative epistemologies of forms and trajectories of squatting and informality in urban and rural contexts. This inquiry becomes particularly important since the focus on relational ties between squatting and informality has been predominantly urban centric. Neither has there been any systematic attempt at understanding everyday forms of life and informality in these rural settlements. My intent is to systematically unpack the everyday practice, maintenance and sustenance of dokhol within the reserved forests of Bodo Territorial Autonomous District. This entails an extension and confrontation of the existing scholarship on formal-informal dichotomies in relation to rural squatters, in particular those on forestland. I do so by using a methodology, combining an ethnographic study of dokhol by rural squatters with three influential strands of critical scholarship on urban squatting, namely Partha Chatterjee’s political society, Asaf Bayat’s quiet encroachment, and Ananya Roy’s take on planning and deregulation. My agenda is to push the case of rural informalities further and open a dialogue between the two forms of informalities – rural and urban, especially in the context of South Asia. Keywords: Reserved Forests, rural Informality, encroachment, gray legality, ethnic conflict

¹ In Assam, 1 *bigha*= 1/3 acres (approximately).

² Personal interview with Jogeswar Lakra, Lung Sung Forest Division, Kokrajhar District, March 28, 2016. I have changed all names to maintain confidentiality.

5.1 Introduction — Why Rural Informality?

At the time of my fieldwork, Jageswar had been residing in the Lung Sung block under the Haltugaon forest division within the Bodo Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) of Assam for over three decades. Being a proud encroacher of over fifteen *bighas* of reserved forestland.³ His response to my question, asked in jest, unlocked a Pandora's box regarding everyday forms and practices of informality in rural squatter settlements inside the reserved forests of Assam.

Using the politics of *dokhol*, as an entry point, in this article I interrogate the comparative epistemologies of forms and trajectories of squatting and informality in urban and rural contexts. *Dokhol* is a local Bengali/Assamese word that translates as “to grab or occupy,” usually illegally. In this context Joeswar used it in relation to land. The most common response among my interviewees as to how they came to possess land was through *dokhol*.

This inquiry is salient because the main focus on relational ties between squatting and informality has been predominantly urban. On the one hand, encroaching on public space and public order has been more pronounced within urban settings. Due in part to the prevalence of police surveillance, urban conflicts over encroachment are more visible and audible, and hence attract more media and scholarly attention.⁴

Conversely, rural forms of squatting and informality have received scarce attention. Tania Li has examined rural squatting in the Dongi-Dongi valley inside Lore Lindu National Park in Sulawesi, Indonesia.⁵ In that case, access to land and natural resources were guided by customary rights that are locally acknowledged and respected, but not formally registered, and therefore “not recognized by the various official agencies responsible for allocating state” land.⁶ Similarly, Ann Stoler has written about squatter settlements and subsequent resistance movements around northern Sumatra's plantation peripheries during the 1960s and 1970s.⁷ More recently Carl Griffin has provided a systematic historical account of squatting practices in rural Britain within the post-Restoration New Forest characterizing squatting as an abuse to forest resources.⁸ This existing body of work on rural squatting in the milieu of plantations or on the fringes of national parks has been framed in a context of resistance rather than everyday forms of mediations and negotiations.⁹ Neither has there been any systematic attempt at understanding everyday forms of life and informality in these

³ All forestland in Assam is officially state owned.

⁴ Personal communication, with Asef Bayat, March 10, 2018

⁵ Li 2007, 167.

⁶ Li 2007, 98.

⁷ Stoler 1986.

⁸ Griffin 2018.

⁹ For an overview of work related to rural squatting in the context of resistance see Li 2007, Griffin 2018, Hilson 2013, Cattaneo 2013.

rural settlements. My intent is to systematically unpack the everyday practice, maintenance, and sustenance of *dokhol* within the reserved forests of BTAD, where *dokhol* operates as a form of gray legality. This entails an extension and confrontation of the existing scholarship on formal-informal dichotomies in relation to rural squatters, in particular those on forestland, mostly referred to as encroachers rather than squatters.¹⁰

In South Asia the debate around informality has been framed through theorizations of the urban poor who live in slums and wage their claims to space and resources from a disadvantaged position as “citizens without a city.”¹¹ The literature on state engagement practiced by the urban poor across several cities in South Asia has revealed a multitude of methods, exploiting the pluralistic, multifaceted and fissured state apparatus.¹² Partha Chatterjee (2004) illustrated these everyday forms of engagement by squatters with the state through his concept of political society. Other scholars emphasize forms of negotiation, claims to urban citizenship by the urban poor, and more recently and the concept of insurgent citizenship.¹³ Roy (2004) has argued for the concept of a subaltern urbanism that not only explores the slum or squatter settlement as a “terrain of habitation, livelihood, and politics,” but as well as a key theoretical frame for rethinking the “epistemologies and methodologies of urban studies.”¹⁴ Bert Suykens has engaged with everyday forms of negotiations through the *dakhal* regime in the context of a slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh, arguing “the notion of *dakhal* firmly positions the use of informality by the (relatively) wealthy (*jomidar*) in the seemingly quintessential place of the poor, thus showing their interconnectedness.”¹⁵ To sum up, scholars of urban informality in South Asia have consistently examined the various forms of popular agency developed by the urban poor and their forms of resistance to state authorities.

In this article, I shift away from this urban-centrism to illustrate how squatting plays out in a remote rural context characterized by conflict along ethno-religious lines, violence-induced displacement, and natural disasters like floods. A better understanding of rural forms of squatting not only contributes to the general body of work on squatting and informality in South Asia and beyond but also shows how squatting and informality play out in precarious rural environments. I combine an ethnographic study of the *dokhol* regime of rural squatters in Assam with three influential

¹⁰ For a comprehensive discussion around issues of the urban poor living in slums, *jhuggis* and squatter settlements and discourses on urban rehabilitation, re-settlement and poverty alleviation specifically in the global south see Ramanathan 2006; Suykens 2015; Benjamin 2008; Isabaeva 2013; Björkman 2014; Hatcher 2015; Rao 2013

¹¹ Appadurai 2001, 27.

¹² See Ranganathan 2014; Rao 2013 (who uses the concept of “tolerated encroachment,” and Das 2011. Jha et al. 2007 discuss how local politicians serve as alternative democratic conduits for the urban poor to derive concessions from the state. Appadurai 2001 and Kumar 2016 demonstrate how the urban poor challenge governmentality from below.

¹³ For a detailed overview on urban citizenship claims see Zerah et al. 2011. For “post-media” urbanism in postcolonial India see Sundaram 2010.

¹⁴ Roy 2011, 224.

¹⁵ See Suykens 2015.

strands of critical scholarship on urban squatting: namely Partha Chatterjee's political society,¹⁶ Asaf Bayat's quiet encroachment,¹⁷ and Ananya Roy's planning and deregulation.¹⁸

The abovementioned scholarship denotes how urban ontologies on informality tend to span collective and individual demands for socio-economic recognition, representation, and access to state welfare services and resources. Although similar categories exist when it comes to rural informalities, an intimate relationship with *maati* (land) is a centrifugal point of ontological departure. This relationship can be traced back to the colonial history of forest making in the state.¹⁹

Urban squatter settlements are usually home to rural migrants, essentially poor people with limited resources.²⁰ As Janice Perlman (2004) writes in the context of favelas in Brazil, they are perceived as "cancerous sores on the beautiful body of the city" and dens of "anti-social activities, filth and various pathologies."²¹ Such claims do not always hold true for rural squatters, because while the slum appears as the "other" in the eyes of city dwellers or civil society,²² rural squatters remain "others" mostly in the eyes of state forest authorities. This form of alienation from aspects of urban living has led to the emergence of "right to the city," a concept coined by Henri Lefebvre in the context of university students protesting in the streets of Paris in May 1968.²³ David Harvey (2003) later linked this to Marxist theory and argued that excluded protestors should go beyond their individual status and strive for collective rights to shape every aspect of the city. In recent times, urban groups have seized upon the term as a slogan to protest against political oppression, disenfranchisement, and unequal distribution of urban services.²⁴ More recently, there has been renewed attention within the urban squatting literature on poor people's movements, while ethnographers have focused on "cramped spaces,"²⁵ spaces within which subaltern classes resist and rebel against government programs.²⁶

However, the concept of rights to the city and everyday resistance might be too extreme in the context to this study. This is encroachment for survival- one day at a time. Rather than a potential site of resistance against exclusion, it is a site of domination and unequal relations of power. To me, the squatters I have engaged with are subjected to even harsher forms of isolation—social, economic

¹⁶ Chatterjee 2004.

¹⁷ Bayat 2000, 2013. Although Bayat used the concept of quiet encroachment in the context of Middle East and authoritarian regimes, authors like Hackenbroch 2013 and Subadevan and Naqvi 2017, among others have used it in the context of urban slums in Dhaka in Bangladesh and Chennai in India.

¹⁸ Roy 2004.

¹⁹ Saikia 2008

²⁰ Roy and Alsayyad 2004.

²¹ Perlman 2004, 120.

²² Chatterjee 2004, 38.

²³ Lefebvre 1996 [1967].

²⁴ LeGates and Stout 2015.

²⁵ Li 2007.

²⁶ Roy 2013.

and political—than their urban counterparts.

Some have argued that urban squatters can derive inspiration by observing the life of the city, while it continues to be hard for them to embrace that dream.²⁷ As such, while urban squatter settlements have often been considered to be at the margins of the state,²⁸ forest squatters' lives are far more marginal. They barely have social or economic networks outside of the forest, and in almost all cases they lack the capital—both social and economic—required to migrate to cities and become urban squatters. In such a context, talking about a “right to the forest” would be spurious.

5.2 Jungle Becomes Forest — The Colonial Project

The colonial project of transforming jungle into forest changed the face of Assam, especially the northwest of the state, Bodoland. The drawing of new borders around an unrestricted jungle to which everybody had access was part of a British policy to make its colonies profitable. In order to do this, natural capital – sal wood, rubber, and silk worms – had to be clearly inventoried. This mapping of the jungle became a political project from 1826 onwards.²⁹ The British Imperial Forest Department, created in 1868, finished the mapping after fifty years. By 1874, much of the jungle in this region had been transformed and divided into a reserved forest, into which only the Forest Department could enter. Political competitors – *zamindars* (big landowners) and local chiefs – were granted access to some forest resources. This policy aided keeping these local elites in check and created a dependency relationship. The main goal of the project was to keep the local population out of the forest. Violence and political repression against encroaching foresters and shifting cultivators (*jhummers*) was thus inherent to border-making.³⁰ The state agency given jurisdiction over this territory, the Forest Department, claimed exclusive rights to allocate and enforce use rights (for example, logging, grazing, or mining) while setting conditions and refraining from allocating the right to lease, transfer, or sell the land.

Although the British presence in Assam dates back to the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, it was only in the 1870s that the British sought to expand their grip on the Assamese economy and regulate the mobility of its tribal population. Competing ownership claims to resources and land in the present can be traced back to the East India Company, which had asserted property rights over the vast forest territories of Assam. This colonial appropriation was sanctified by legislation in the years of

²⁷ Perlman 2004.

²⁸ Das and Poole 2004.

²⁹ The treaty of Yandaboo was signed in 1826 between the kingdom of Ava and Britain and led to the withdrawal of the Burmese from Assam and by 1842 the whole of Assam came under the British rule.

³⁰ Saikia 2008; Van Schendel, Mey and Dewan 2000 write about the marginalization of indigenous *jhummers* in the Chittagong Hill Tracts after it came under the colonial rule in the 1860s.

British imperialism.³¹ Various legal enactments led to a situation in which most forest areas were leased out to British tea planters.³²

These tea plantations required enhanced labor support and this was supplied by immigrant workers from across British India.³³ Thousands of Adivasi peasants and Bengalis were resettled in Assam as tea and jute plantation workers. Interestingly, in local popular imagination the forest remained part of the agrarian frontier, notwithstanding the changed landscape. This land grabbing by British tea planters led to eventual upheaval and disturbances in the area, leading the British colonial government to introduce an inner line permit system in 1873.³⁴ According to Guha (1977), “Under this system, an imaginary line was drawn in the districts under pressure in order to settle immigrants in segregated areas.”³⁵ The net result of land settlement in Assam shifted large expanses of land and forest resources from the control of the peasantry to the colonial state. In recent years, this historic land issue has reemerged at the heart of recurring ethno-political conflict in the region, demonstrated by the practice of *dokhol*.³⁶

5.3 A Theatre of Violent Conflict on Ethno-Religious Lines: Forest becomes Frontline

The continuation of the colonial process of forest making in the post-colonial period is particularly significant in the case of Adivasis³⁷ and their settlements inside the forestlands of western Assam. These populations are erstwhile tea laborers whose forefathers have migrated to Assam from central and eastern India at different periods since the middle of the nineteenth century in search of work. Being non-Scheduled Tribes in Assam, their descendants have no forest use rights. Over time, these Adivasis (along with Bengali migrants) became part of a rural mobility and began to seek land in distant forests. Agitated and threatened by their continued efforts at grabbing forestland, Bodos clamored for state protection of tribal land, which led in 1947 to the amendment of the Land and Revenue Regulation Act of 1886. The newly independent government of India created tribal belt and block areas.³⁸ This restricted the transfer of land to non-indigenous people in such protected

³¹ Saikia 2008.

³² Guha 1993.

³³ Bhowmick 1981; Siddique 1990.

³⁴ Vandekerckhove 2009.

³⁵ Guha 1977.

³⁶ See Mishra 1999, 2012, 2013; Barbora 2008; Baruah 1999, 2001; Vandekerckhove 2009.

³⁷ Adivasis here mostly refer to groups who were brought from Bengal, undivided Bihar, and the Chotanagpur plateau to work on tea plantations. They consist mainly of Oraon, Munda, and Santhals. In recent times there are claims of Santhals immigrating to these areas from Jharkhand. While these groups have specific rights over forestland under the Forest Rights Act, this does not extend to BTAD where they do not have scheduled caste (ST) status.

³⁸ The tribal belts and blocks were established with the objective of protecting land from occupation by



Figure 5.1: Squatter settlement burnt during Bodo-Adivasi conflict in December 2014, Ultapaani Reserved Forest, Kokrajhar District. Credit: Author.

areas. However, land in tribal reserves continued to be sold to outsiders well into the 1980s. Not surprisingly the issue of protection of tribal land and forests was a prominent demand of the All Bodo Student Union's (ABSU) agitation for the creation of a separate state of Bodoland, which turned violent in the later part of 1980s after the formation of insurgent groups. This illustrates how the Bodo–Adivasi-Muslim conflict that followed “was about land and its delineation, as the Bodo militants saw their natural, exclusive ethno-botanical link with their Bodo homeland threatened by the non-autochthones”.³⁹

It is therefore important to situate the emergence of *dokhol* within the turbulent movement for a separate state of Bodoland, which in turn is intertwined in a history of forest making and insurgency. The Bodoland Movement culminated in 2003 with a tripartite Memorandum of Agreement known

groups other than the protected class of people such as plains and hills tribes, STs, and Nepali grazers. Later on, indigenous Koch-Rajbongshis of Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts were also added to this category.

³⁹ Vandekerckhove 2009.

as the second Bodo Accord. The Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) was then established and four Bodoland Autonomous Territorial Districts delineated. Although this accord ended the insurgency the process has been commonly referred to as a manufactured peace since it continues to be temporal. Incidents of violence erupted again between Bodos and Muslims and Bodos and Adivais in 2008, 2012, and 2014. A key feature of the conflict is that it took place in the forests bordering Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh.⁴⁰ The area was once known as *Kachari* (an older terminology for the Bodo) *Dooar* and acknowledged as the traditional territory of the Bodo people. As already mentioned, large parts of the area, mostly forest lands, bordering Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh was turned into reserved forests during British colonization, subsequently making it off-limits for the indigenous people of the region. Initially it was mostly due to the scarcity of cultivable land that led both Bodos and Adivasis to encroach on the forest areas. However, interviews with local non government organization's (NGO) staff, forest officers and members of the ABSU indicate that a sizeable number of Bodos settled in these reserved forests during the Bodoland movement in the early 1990s in order to match the already settled Adivasi population. This was possible because the forest areas during the conflict were mostly controlled by insurgent groups like the Bodo Liberation Tigers and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland. Only after 2000 were stringent counter-insurgency measures resumed. Moreover, in recent times, the reserved forests have also served as a place for temporary rehabilitation of victims of ethnic violence.

The reserved forests in the Bodo region thus have emerged as a gray zone of informal economies and practices. This is because the continued state attempt to control forests has not eliminated illegality or informality, rather as I shall empirically show, at many levels it has stimulated it.

5.4 Comparative Epistemologies: Urban-Rural

Delving into urban informalities, Partha Chatterjee has emphasized the notion of “para-legality” in the context of a Railway colony in the city of Kolkata.⁴¹ Lacking full citizenship, the vast majority of India's urban population is left to make claims on the state from the murky field of political brokerage, which he calls the “political society,” where the needs of this excluded populace are voiced and occasionally met, but always as conditional claims rather than formal rights.⁴² The political society makes claims to state services by forming associations and by “making a large array of connections outside the group—with other groups in similar situations, more privileged and

⁴⁰ The data for this paper was collected primarily in reserved forests bordering Bhutan and therefore the focus will be on that specific borderland.

⁴¹ Chatterjee 2004.

⁴² Chatterjee 2004.

influential groups, government functionaries, political parties and leaders.”⁴³ This political society is not segregated along caste, religious, or ethnic lines, especially when it comes to lobbying for rights and services. As one of his interviewees explained, “We are all a single family. We don’t distinguish between refugees from East Bengal and those from villages in West Bengal.”⁴⁴

My observations on rural forms of squatting and informalities digress from this form of political society on several points. The political society approach over-emphasizes collective action through associations, especially in the case of communities that do not live in urban cityscapes with direct access to politicians and state officers. Moreover, BTADs is a militarized society unlike urban centers like Delhi, Kolkata, or Mumbai. Additionally, the squatter settlements in these districts are ethnically segregated, since the very nature of conflict in the region has been on ethnic lines. Also, urban slums are made up of rural migrants who relocated to the semi-urban periphery of cities. In some cases cities grow around them. This story does not take into account the tales of those who have neither the resources nor the networks to migrate from rural areas and thus are relegated to the peripheries of rural areas, such as forests. When asked about the trajectory of mobility, more recent settlers in these districts responded, “Our houses have been burned during the conflict and we are too scared to go back. We do not have the means to migrate to Guwahati like some of our neighbors back in the village.” They always added, “We wish for our own piece of land” (*amak nizer maati laage*).

Ananya Roy in her work on urban informality asserts that emerging patterns of informal urban development in many regions of the world occur on private rather than public plots of land, involving new and shifting configuration of actors like real-estate developers, liberalizing government officers and bourgeois urbanities.⁴⁵ She describes informality as a mode of metropolitan urbanization and argues that South Asian research on this topic can make a significant contribution to the understanding of such processes.⁴⁶ With its strident focus on the agrarian question, the spatiality of rural urban nexuses, and the implications of neo liberal reforms for state power, this research can address questions about how the rural-urban interface is determined by urban and agrarian laws and regulations, and how these are restructured in the context of liberalization. Along with the political society literature, this assumes that South Asian and particularly Indian urban informalities operate within not only a vibrant democracy but also one free from violence along ethnic and religious lines. However, rural informality within the BTAD is more akin to that of Lebanon during its civil war, with ethnic politics playing a crucial role, or the case of Israel/Palestine, where informal land rights of settlers have been intensely ethicized. Moreover Roy’s focus has mostly

⁴³ Chatterjee 2004, 40-41.

⁴⁴ Chatterjee 2004, 56.

⁴⁵ Roy 2004

⁴⁶ Roy 2009

been on semi-urban peripheries, while my focus is on the peripheries of the rural. The increasing (dis)associations between the state and encroachers unpack the spatial and legal categorization of the forest settlements as informal, given that the ontological division between the formal and the informal and the hegemonic connection of the state to legality appear to be increasingly devious.⁴⁷

In regard to resistance, empirical evidence suggests that instead of resisting the state, forest squatters make deliberate attempts to remain invisible from the gaze of the state, baring certain events like evictions or elections, when the state comes to them. Typically, they make do with whatever limited resources and services they have access to.

Forms of rural informality in BTAD are similar mirror the squatting, street trading, and the illegal tapping of utilities in urban Iran observed by Bayat: "... quiet encroachment - silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied, powerful, or the public in order to survive and improve their lives".⁴⁸ These processes of appropriation have been enacted "quietly, individually, and gradually" rather than through organized social movements or associations, and are justified as acts of necessity in a context where the state has failed to provide employment or housing.

In the case of rural informalities, there is no supply of electricity, water pipelines, gas, or services such as health-care or education to illegally tap inside the reserved forests. Forest squatters silently squat on their most valued possession, land, in the context of violent conflict and forms of insecure land tenure.

5.5 Ethnographic Inquiry into the Site and the Notion of *Dokhol*

I conducted over ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in three phases. The first phase was carried out from April to June 2014, after an episode of ethnic violence between Bodos and Muslims in April 2014, followed by the national elections in May 2014. The second phase was from February to May 2015, and preceded ethnic clashes between Bodos and Adivasis in December 2014 and BTAD council elections in April 2015. The final phase was from February to May 2016, during which time the Assam Assembly elections were held. During my fieldwork I focused on five factors that not only reinforce the *dokhol* regime but also add to our knowledge of gray legalities. These factors include recurring violence along ethnic lines, periodic elections, episodic evictions, construction of semi-permanent structures, and counter-insurgency operations. Although similar processes can be found at work in urban settlements, the geographical, socio-political, and economical context of these rural settlements distinguish them from urban peripheries.

⁴⁷ C.f. Rajagopal 2008.

⁴⁸ Bayat 2000.



Figure 5.2: A girl poses inside her home (interiors of a forest squatter's home), Lungsung, Kokrajhar District. Credit: Author.

I situate these factors within the system of institutional decentralization, where the forest department falls under the local BTAD administration. The counter-insurgency operations within the forest is led by the state of Assam through Assam Police and Indian central government through the Indian Army. However, resettlement policies post conflict is the responsibility of the Assam state, the central government of India as well as the BTAD. These factors shed light on how the space of gray legality in a rural and forest space is comprised of a complex web of relations, recognitions, and concessions that transcends formal (legal) property rights within a system of unauthorized tenure leading to insecure and uncertain tenure and access to forest resources. It is thus similar to Chatterjee's railway colony and Roy's processes of deregulation. Before detailing each of these factors, I sketch the context in a more empirical fashion through one of my visits to Sorolpara, a remote village located within the Haltugaon forest division in Kokrajhar district on the indo-Bhutan borderlands. I was accompanied by a forest ranger and his team of forest guards, which enabled me to observe interactions between authorities and encroachers. A walk through the destroyed vestige of the forest⁴⁹ presented a gradual appropriation of space, with tiny make-shift bamboo hovels scattered across the landscape with plots of land in front used for cultivating chilies and mustard.

We ventured deep and came across what according to the forest ranger was a green patch with several tall trees the last time he was there, some three months before this. It had been cleared and converted into a cowshed. The ranger was apparently informed of this by the para-military patrolling the area. This infuriated the ranger:

We already give them so much leeway, the last time I visited I asked them to stay on already deforested areas of land and not cut more trees by sticking to marshy land on the river bank. The District Forest Officer (DFO) had drawn an imaginary boundary six months back and had requested them to not cross that, but these greedy people have crossed this line as well. I will not do anything but report to the police and let the police deal with it.

He added, "Most of these encroachers are new settlers and have come from nearby villages or even Jharkhand."⁵⁰

The practice of claiming, clearing and eventually allocating pieces of land was usually executed through brokers or *diwanis*⁵¹ who were in most cases headmen of an existing village within the

⁴⁹ There has been a rapid erosion of what actually constitutes forestland in the region. In post-colonial times, this was through rampant felling of trees during the Bodoland movement, when timber sales were used to fund the rebel movement, state administrators cleared the forest for counter-insurgency operations, and Bodo and adivasi communities cut the forest for construction of houses and farming. In recent times, rampant timber smuggling has also been a cause of deforestation. Therefore, in reality the landscape is one of vast stretches of cleared land with mostly non-precious trees strewn around and bamboo huts.

⁵⁰ Jharkhand is a state in Eastern India. The Santhals are an *adivasi* ethnic group native to this state.

⁵¹ This describes a person who yields power especially through close relationships with local politicians and administrators.



Figure 5.3: A squatter settlement deep inside the forest in Sorolpara, Kokrajhar district. Credit: Author.

reserved forests. The *diwani* (in most cases belonging to adivasi or Bodo ethnic groups) first claims and clears a big patch of land, builds a thatch and bamboo house, and proclaims himself the headman. He then invites people in his social network (but within his own ethnic group) that live in nearby villages or those that have been displaced due to conflict or natural disasters to come and settle on a piece of land usually measuring about twelve *bighas*⁵² in return for a small fee. Over time families settle and the cleared land is transformed into a small hamlet with as many as fifteen households. In interviews with settlers, residents were unanimously aware of encroaching on state property, since each time I asked how they came in possession of land, the answer was “*ami dokhol korisu or etu dokhol maati*” (we have encroached or this is occupied land). They said they had purchased the land from a certain forest official and in consultation with the *dewai* they had the right to rent, sell, or transfer their landholdings within their ethnic group with the approval of the *rajya*⁵³. When I asked if they had directly paid the forest official, the usual response was, “No ... we paid to the *diwani* and he assured us that he would pay to the official on our behalf.” This indicates the reluctance of the squatters to engage directly with the forest authorities.

When I posed this question to the forest ranger, he was completely unaware of any such transactions and said that land clearing was an illegal racket run by the *diwanis* in connivance with and backing of local politicians. It was evident that the fuzzy boundaries drawn by the forest officer were frequently transgressed, often with the knowledge of these officers. In an interview the District Forest Officer (DFO) explained how evictions were mostly symbolic:

GIS imagery from 1976 reveals no trace of settlements in Lungsung and Sorolpara, indicating this as a recent phenomenon. When it comes to eviction, we carry it out peacefully and give the encroachers prior notice so that they have time to gather their belongings. Given the limited financial budget of the forest department, eviction drives have become a rarity and mostly symbolic. After all, these are poor people and they also need a place to live. We usually encourage them to erect temporary bamboo structures so that the damage during evictions is minimal and they can move back to their homes within a day. Evictions are mostly a way to contain the expansion of settlements rather than permanent displacement or ousting of the population.

There are no resettlement or rehabilitation policies for forest squatters, who forest officers refer to as *jongli* or wild. Moreover, given the remoteness of these settlements, lack of resources, and risks of insurgency, it is extremely difficult even for the forest department to have adequate data on the actual number of households illegally occupying state forestland. Secondly, the production of informality in this context challenges the notion that state institutions enact laws in an unambiguous manner.

⁵² In Assam, 1 bigha= 1/3 acres (approximately).

⁵³ A *rajya* is something like a *panchayat* but in this case informally selected by the villagers comprising of old and wise men with economic resources and political connections. Matters of land allocation, allocation of votes, settling of disputes are generally managed and decided on by them.



Figure 5.4: Home of a forest squatter from outside, in Lungsung, Kokrajhar District. Credit: Author.

Rather, in this ambiguous space of gray legality and insecure tenure, a symbiotic and symbolic relationship prevails between (formal) state and informal practices.⁵⁴ The encroachers comply with periodic evictions as long as they are given prior notification and have time to gather their valuables, if any, since their most valued possession is the land. Recent squatters have transgressed boundaries in two ways- by being invisible, usually venturing deep inside the reserved forest to areas not frequented by forest officers, and by expanding existing settlements rather than establishing new villages, making it difficult for the forest officers to identify new settlements.⁵⁵

Similar to their counterparts who spend years squatting in urban areas, transgression and improvisation become the condition of living for forest encroachers, without necessarily resulting in forms of collective action. The collective life of those living on the fringes is one of *jugaad*, the creative and opportunistic piecing together of arrangements, exemplified by the practice of squatting or encroaching.⁵⁶ This symbiotic relationship between law as manifested through the state apparatus and legal acts and forest as a political space of everyday contestation and negotiations have been continuing since colonial times.⁵⁷

Additional issues concerning security and counter-insurgency operations seep into the everyday practices of encroachment, which makes the geography of rural squatting unique as compared to an urban city. This comes with constant vigilance and patrolling by the armed forces as well as their impunity to kill under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). The consistent lack of clarity in respect to state laws related to informality and the drawing of fuzzy boundaries within the reserved forests enables flexible accommodation, but also gives unchecked eviction rights to state officers.⁵⁸ Boundaries within forests are ambiguously assigned and in a constant state of flux depending on relationships between encroachers and officers. Therefore, the *dokhol* regime comprises “fuzzy zones of compromise, hide and seek, accumulation and accommodation” that “become the rule rather than exception.”⁵⁹

Next, I turn to the five factors that aid in the practice of *dokhol* over time. These are not to be viewed in isolation but overlap and flow from and into the other. These factors help unpack comparative epistemologies of mutually exclusive contexts of informality and marginalization that have great potential in interrogating meanings of gray zones by incorporating accounts of rural informality.

⁵⁴ See Cooper 1998

⁵⁵ Interview with forest ranger on September 15, 2016.

⁵⁶ cf. Gotz and Simone 2003; Simone 2001.

⁵⁷ Sivaramakrishnan 1995.

⁵⁸ Hall, Hirsh and Li 2011,12

⁵⁹ Ibid, 16

5.5.1 Recurring Violence on Ethnic Lines

BTAD has been the site of recurrent violent contestations along ethno-religious lines. This frequently results in large-scale displacement. Initial rehabilitation efforts by the state consist in setting up makeshift relief camps within the reserved forest. Once temporarily settled, displaced people usually refuse to return to their original homes, either out of personal fear, worries that their homes have been destroyed, or concerns that they will not receive a resettlement grant to construct a new house. There are also cases where the displaced do not have title to land and temporary resettlement serves as a cue to work towards the establishment of a *dokhol* regime. As one of the DFOs explained:

The administration (referring to the district and state governments) always sets up relief camps inside the forests since it is considered a safer haven in times of turmoil and the population can be segregated on ethnic lines and placed in different camps under the protection of the para-military forces. Since the army and para-military outposts are already set up inside the forest for counter-insurgency purposes, it makes sense to place the displaced population close to these already established units. However, once a relief camp is set up for 100 people, more than 200 arrive, even those not affected by conflict but looking to grab land. I would blame this entire business of illegal encroachment to administrative failure.

According to DFOs, rangers, and NGO workers I interviewed, on average about twenty to thirty percent of people displaced after each incident of violence refuse to move back to their homes. This is illustrated by one of my interlocutors, whose in-laws have been living in Lung Sung since the conflict began in 1998:

My in-laws first lived around *char*⁶⁰ land and were displaced due to soil erosion. After living in a relief camp for a couple of months they returned to their old home and were displaced for a second time due to the building of a dam. They were rehabilitated in a nearby village but were displaced for a third time in 1998 due to ethnic violence. Then they contacted relatives in Lung Sung and moved there. Now they have over fifteen *bighas* of *dokhol* land and they refuse to move anywhere else. They will not leave their land.

This account brings to fore aspiration, a key factor in rural—urban migration. Appadurai (2004,31) characterizes aspiration as a specifically cultural capacity, thus moving culture away from an association with “pastness”.⁶¹ However, this does not exclude the fact that a majority of rural-urban migration happens in search of better economic prospects. As Annapurna Shaw (2008,21) points out in a review of Ananya Roy’s book on Calcutta Requiem: Gender and the Politics of Poverty “With our cities growing larger, their fringes or where the urban and rural meet, have become sites of conflict over land and other resources, and are experiencing considerable demographic and social

⁶⁰ A track of land surrounded by river or sea.

⁶¹ Appadurai 2007, 31



Figure 5.5: A post-conflict relief camp inside the reserved forest in Haltugaon Forest Division, Kokrajhar District. Credit: Author.

change.”⁶² She further adds that the growth in such squatter settlements since the 1980s is an indicator of increasing landlessness in rural areas. Forest squatters illustrate the vulnerabilities of landless, displaced populations who have no means of commuting to a city and hence find themselves on the peripheries of remote villages. As some of my interlocutors recounted, “We will never get so much land anywhere. We shall give our blood but not part with our land” (*Ami aru kot u imaan maati napau. Aami tez dim kintu maati nidieu*). Once settled in the forest, the encroachers make sure to not construct any permanent or solid structures and seek to remain invisible. Maneuvering between having legal land rights (*patta*) and squatting emerges as a process of ambiguity subject to resourceful manipulation.

5.5.2 Periodic Elections

Along with elections to the national parliament and the state assembly, residents of the BTAD also elect a territorial council. The elections are an important democratic event where the jungle emerges as a centrifugal space for political campaigns that in turn permit encroachers to leverage the advantages of scale to address the state administration and advance their claims to the land they occupy. Interestingly, political parties come to the forest instead of squatters going into towns to attend political rallies. As a political imaginary, periodic elections and election campaign attempts to build a political space in which each of its constituents can live under the safety of a state, which I define as a temporary absence of state-led evictions. Like their urban counterparts, the *diwanis* are conscious of being valued as votes and use this position to negotiate with the political parties and the local administration for wells, roads, and even land rights. These practices are particularly important for encroachers’ ability to engage with the state. By articulating these efforts the state is in many ways compelled to expand the circuit of knowledge accessible to these communities. But the engagement happens at an individual level and has not resulted in collective forms of resistance.⁶³ Therefore voting becomes a necessity rather than an exercise of choice. As Malati who had been dwelling on forestland in Lungsung since two decades with her family said in an interview ⁶⁴, “Elections will come and go. We vote because they ask us to vote and say if we don’t vote we will be evicted. We just want to live peacefully inside the forest.”

This gradual involvement of the state and with the state over time in turn unpacks and shifts the meaning of informality and reaffirms the point that these are not reified end products. To illustrate the above, in one of my visits to Lungsung just before the 2016 Assam Assembly elections, a forest ranger said:

⁶² Shaw 2008, 21

⁶³ This resonates with squatters in Tehran who steal urban services not to express their defiance vis-a-vis the authorities, but to necessity. See Bayat 1997.

⁶⁴ Interview with Malati, Lungsung, April 19, 2016

We [the forest department] repeatedly warn the encroachers to not cross the boundaries and clear more trees to construct houses, but what can we do when the politicians assure them of granting land *patta*. Only last week a senior Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), who has been in power for over a decade, distributed cartons consisting of an assortment of tarpaulin sheets, utensils like pans and pots, a bucket, mug, mosquito net and some firewood. These are gears necessary to sustain in these forests. I have even heard that they have granted permission to an NGO for the construction of a school on forestland. So, how are we supposed to do anything when the politicians are encouraging them to nest illegally; because of them (politicians) we become the bad guys.

The relationships that emerge between vote seekers and the electorate is not limited to the event of elections but often lead to formation of larger patronage networks which are of course unequal in nature, where some encroachers manage to stay and some are forced to exit the reserved forest. According to Chatterjee (2004,40), in case of urban slum dwellers, “They profess a readiness to move out if they are given suitable alternative sites for resettlement, for instance.”⁶⁵ But this does not hold true for these forest squatters. Eviction usually results in them going deeper into the forest. The process of political accommodation was explained to me by an officer of the Indian Police Services who, being concerned with the continuing encroachment, had approached the Minister of Forest for the BTAD. He related to me the conversation that transpired between them:

I told the Minister about a recent trip to Sorolpara where I noticed new encroachers in a particular area. The minister said to me, if you would like to evict them, you have to do it now when they are less in number. Once the number of households goes over forty, we will not be in a position to issue political clearance, as it will affect our chances in the next election.

This reflects the close relationship that exists between legality and political practice on the ground, where those in positions of power maneuver through constitutional definitions of illegality to further their political interests and promote illegal accommodation based on insecure tenure. This fragility and partiality of the state and its involvement with law making is “... an aspect of more complex power relations.”⁶⁶ The lives and homes of the squatters continue to hang by the thread of electoral politics, and they remain subject to be evicted anytime according to the whims of either the ruling party (once they have won the elections) or the forest department on grounds of afforestation and conservation.

5.5.3 Episodic Evictions

Interviews with forest officers, senior officers of the state police, and local politicians always pointed towards one solution to the problem of encroachment - eviction. When asked where these

⁶⁵ Chatterjee 2004,40

⁶⁶ Mitchell 1991, 77.

marginalized people would go after eviction, there were no clear answers. A DFO said, “We could get a few *bighas* and settle them on grazing lands by the highway,” while another forest officer said, “They have come from Jharkhand and they should be sent back.” Evictions (not always staged) are a constant in the lives of the encroachers. Satya Murmu⁶⁷, who had been encroaching over thirteen *bighas* of land in Lungsung recounted,

We have almost gotten used to eviction since the forest ranger usually informs us in advance and ask us to temporarily vacate our shacks. They also advise us to not build solid structures to minimize the damage of eviction. There have been incidents where we have clashed with the forest department by pelting stones and standing guard in front of our homes when they came to evict us without prior notice, but eventually we returned. Almost all of us have over ten *bighas* of land and no matter where they resettle us, if at all; we will never have so much land. The forest department does not really trouble us much.

The above assertion has to be situated in context of forest officers, especially the guards who live in close proximity to communities and often are of the same ethnicity. Over time the forest department has reverted to a politics of negotiation and only selective contestation towards the *dokhol* regime. Protecting the forest while trying to uphold the welfare of the encroachers within highly rigid and outdated forest laws and regulations brings to the fore the contradictions associated with laws and strategies that are inconsistent. The encroachers as well as the forest department engage in a policy of mediation wherein they navigate between rebel disturbances, rigid forest laws, and an influx of encroachers seeking a means of livelihood.

I would like to explain this phenomenon through an event of eviction that happened in 1998 and assumed monumental importance due to its magnanimity and over all implication. I have collected two versions of this particular incident, one from the DFO in charge and the other from the encroachers who were directly affected by it. According to the encroacher:

The forest department did not give us any prior notice, there were some rumors that an eviction drive would be carried out, but we were not specifically informed and hence were not prepared. The forest department along with the army⁶⁸ not only demolished our houses but also set it on fire. When we tried to resist, some of us were brutally beaten up. In fact, an infant who was inside one of the houses lost his life to the fire.

The DFO’s rejoinder was the following:

It was a peaceful drive in which we demolished over fifty houses and requested the encroachers to either go back to their native villages, in case they did not have access to any land *patta*, we promised to resettle them on grazing land across the highway from Karigaon. We carried out this

⁶⁷ Interview with Satya Murmu , Lungsung, March 15, 2016

⁶⁸ The locals usually did not distinguish between the army and the para-military and usually used the term army to refer to both.



Figure 5.6: Possessions of a squatter family in Saralpara, Kokrajhar District. Credit: Author.

operation with the help of para-military forces. As far as we are concerned, no lives were lost in the process but the cunning encroachers burned a cat and used the corpse of the cat to accuse us of murdering an infant in the process. These are just blatant lies and I can assure you that it was the corpse of a cat.

Eventually this case was taken to the High Court of the state of Assam. The court acquitted the DFO and dismissed allegations against the forest department but ruled that henceforth every eviction drive had to be accompanied by planned processes of resettlement and rehabilitation. Since then there have been fewer evictions.

5.5.4 Construction of (Semi-)Permanent Structures

According to Indian law it is illegal to erect any structure inside a reserved forest. Although encroachers are aware that they are encroaching on land claimed by the government, they did not believe their illegal village settlement was different from legal villages where people had land titles and access to state services such as health clinics, schools, and well water. This arose from the

belief that the state had a responsibility to protect its citizens, something repeatedly promised by candidates during elections. Forms of mediation and negotiations over time can lead, in rare cases, to the erection of permanent structures. I witnessed one such case within a reserved forest space that housed a concrete building, mainly used as a school. A local adivasi leader who was also a senior teacher at this school explained:

We have been residing here post the conflict of 1998 and have not yet received compensation from the government. Our houses were burned down during the conflict and we are still scared to go back since our village is very close to Bodo villages. So, we decided to construct make shift houses in the same space which once used to be the relief camp but still have no running water or electricity. For this school, we had to pressurize the education department. The Don Bosco foundation first built this school with bamboo and thatch, as an educational project to instruct children of the relief camp up to primary level and gradually the groundwork for a concrete structure was put in place. It finally took over eight years for this school to come up and now we teach up to tenth grade here.

When I asked the DFO about this, he gave me a sly look and almost whispered:

Did you have a careful look at the foundation stone just outside the school building? It was laid and inaugurated by the BTAD's minister for forest and tourism. I should also mention that during elections, this school is turned into a polling booth for all the squatters residing even in nearby areas.

Erection of permanent structures like school buildings by political parties serve a two-fold purpose. On the one hand it increases the bargaining capacity of the encroachers by rendering some permanence to the system of *dokhol* and on the other it helps politicians gain electoral support. Therefore state law appears to be increasingly fragmented and internally pluralized⁶⁹. Often, parties in power tend to support the construction of semi-permanent structures, that are easy to demolish since changes in ruling government along with local leaders and ministers usually affect these decisions.

5.6 Counter-Insurgency Operations

The reserved forest is at the core of the state's counter-insurgency operations. In the last two decades, the armed movement for the creation of Bodoland has forced the forest department out of the interior parts of the reserved forests after several incidents in which rebels burnt down forest check-posts. In one incident in December 2014, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland-Songbijit faction

⁶⁹ Santos 2002.

launched an attack on a squatter settlement, establishing their presence in the inner parts of the forest. The military has responded by felling tall trees so as to seek out rebel hideouts. Eventually encroachers have occupied these cleared plots of land. In one of the encroached villages I visited, the headman said:

Look at the clear patches of land around, it used be forest; it is the work of the Indian Army. We heard that rebels were hiding in these forests and one day the army came and cut down all the trees. Now people have built houses there.

Moreover, the limited control over forest by the forest department due to fear of insurgents has also opened up space for encroachers. Most of the forest offices have been relocated in army and para-military camps, further distancing the forest department from everyday forest life.⁷⁰ The forests have emerged both as the center of conflict and counter-insurgency operations and conservation. The squatters find themselves stuck in between these processes, where they fear further attacks from the insurgents and eviction threats by the state.

5.7 Conclusion

In this article I have compared and contrasted how informality plays out in a rural context by identifying five ethnographic factors which demonstrate squatter's unconditional attachment to land and the practices which allow them to hold this land. This intersection between formal governance and informal encroachment in a forest setting illustrates *dokhol* as a tactic. This also reflects the vulnerabilities and power relations that come with living on the fringes of the state. The rural squatters in this study are not only extremely poor and vulnerable; they have also been kept out of academic discourses and policy domains.

These rural squatters prefer to remain invisible from the gaze of the state and practice *dokhol*, but not as a form of collective action. A key reason attributed to *dokhol* by a forest ranger was, "These are all new people who have taken *xujuk* or opportunity during the conflict and settled here." Conflict opened up junctures to retain this attachment to land. I have also highlighted how, unlike their urban counterparts who negotiate and resist in order to gain access to housing, water, education and health, these forest encroachers usually use less than one *bigha* of their total land to build a make shift house, often trampled upon by wild elephants. What motivates them to live deep in the forest is the idea of possession of fifteen *bighas* of land. Land is scare in quantity; what is scare is legal land. It is this legal scarcity that entrenches the squatters in unequal power relations with state authorities. Factors like counter-insurgency operations and the presence of insurgents allow them to hold onto their small pieces of land, while remaining invisible.

⁷⁰ This relates to Peluso and Vandergeest's work on violence as an opportunity to find more entry as a state in affected areas. See Peluso and Vandergeest 2011.

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6 Forest becomes Frontline — the Ecological Task Force, Conservation and Counter-Insurgency in a Space of Violent Ethno-Religious Conflict in Assam, India

Under Review: Special Issue – Conservation and Violent Environments in Political Geography.

Abstract

Using the case of the Ecological Task Force (ETF) of the Indian Army as an entry point, I expand on existing conceptual and theoretical views on green militarization and violent environments in the context of poaching and national parks. I situate this within the broader literature on critical conservation and militarized conservation practices and applying it to the reserved forests (RFs) in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) in Assam, northeast India. Here, politics that surround conservation is immersed within a context of violent ethno-religious conflict. The BTAD has been a theatre of recurrent insurgencies between the autochthonous Bodo tribe and the Adivasi, Muslim groups over land and territory. A key characteristic of the conflict is its occurrence in the RFs on Assam-Bhutan borderlands, which can be traced back to the colonial process of forest making that brought immigrants into Assam, threatening cultural and territorial loss for Bodos. During the Bodo movement for a separate state, starting in 1980s and continuing, the militants operated from within the forest, leading to the departure of the forest department. As a result, rebels and locals appropriated the forest through rampant resource extraction. In response, the ETF was constituted in 2007. Fieldwork suggests that ETF is not engaged in counter-insurgency, and rely on the regular Army for protection during conservation operations. Drawing on regional environmental history, I analyze how ethno-religious conflict influences modes of conservation exemplified by continuing inter-institutional competition between the forest department and the ETF. I further argue that at the end it is counter-insurgency that prevails over conservation in the RFs. Moreover, despite ETF's efforts to buffer from local politics, incidents of a political nature seep into its operations, e.g. ambushed by militants during conservation activities.

6.1 Introduction

Traditionally, the role of the military, across the globe has been to defend the integrity of the country's international borders from external aggression, to ensure internal peace, counter-insurgency or anti-terrorism operations. After the Second World War, two additional dimensions were added: international peacekeeping and disaster relief. However, it is an established fact that the greatest threat to the planet is colossal environmental degradation resulting, *inter alia*, from the greenhouse effect, the piercing of the ozone layer, deforestation, pollution of water and land resources, acid rain and rampant consumerism. Conversely, well before the discourse of environmental degradation, security and climate change entered public consciousness in the Indian sub-continent, the Indian Army engaged in environmental restoration in the form of afforestation and sand dune stabilization. An abundance of empirical cases illustrates that the military has diverged from its traditionally assumed responsibility of defending the state from external enemies to nontraditional missions inside the state. For example, in light of increased participation of the European Union's (EU) armed forces in diverse operations, including peacekeeping, Timothy Edmunds (2006) asks the following question: what are the armed forces for? According to him, since the end of the Cold War in 1991, a profound shift occurred in states' perception of military roles. This was because after the collapse of the bipolar system and the US–Soviet rivalry, internal conflicts and civil wars came to the fore. Further reassessment of contemporary military roles was caused by the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the consequent “War on Terror,” followed by the invasion of Iraq. New security challenges compelled the EU governments to use their armed forces for diverse internal security purposes, including assisting local law enforcement during national disasters.

In India although, the process of involving the armed forces in conservation commenced in the 1980s and since then a number of Ecological Task Force or ETF units have been raised in the Territorial Army of the Indian Armed Forces and currently there are six battalions across five states, namely Rajasthan, Assam, Delhi, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttarakhand. There is a lack of visibility of the role of the ETF, which could be attributed to certain factors, including civil-military relations (despite the absence of any discernible attempts of the armed forces to stage a coup unlike neighboring countries in South Asia like Pakistan and Bangladesh) and organizational inertia within the military, among others. However, with increasing signs of the impact of climate change coupled with growing clout of India in global climate governance, D'Souza (1994) also projected that the Indian military could be an instrumental player and leading force in India's climate change policy and strategy on domestic and international fronts. In keeping with this, Michael Harbottle (1992), recommended the raising of and training by the ETF in Mongolia, Nepal and Vietnam as part of India's military diplomacy through an ecological theme.

Conceptually, the idea of using military in conservation efforts was suggested by Dr. Ernest

Borlaug, the father of the green revolution in the early 1980s when he proposed the need for a disciplined force to undertake such tasks as it was beyond repair by civilian agencies. He recommended that the Indian Army on 'war footing' should take up the task of environmental protection and restoration. The then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, on observing the ecological degradation in the Himalayas, operationalized the idea by issuing an executive order to form an ETF out of the Territorial Army. The most recent 135 Infantry Battalion was set up in 2007 in the Haltugaon forest division within the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) of Assam in Northeast India. Unlike the other battalions of the ETF (J&K being an exception), this is situated within the conflict context of BTAD, where the primary task of the ETF is afforestation and soil conservation of the RFs destroyed over the years by rebel violence and COIN operations through massive illegal logging. One of the major reasons for establishing this unit was the fast depleting forest cover in the region coupled with political instability which led to the expulsion of the forest department from the RF, resulting in further (il)legal extraction of resources like timber. For example, the forest cover in Kokrajhar district alone, declined from 51.44 (as percentage of total geographical area) in 1999 to 36.10 in 2009 (Nath and Mwchahary 2012). Till 2013, the ETF had planted over three hundred thousand saplings in an area of over nine thousand 3700 hectares.¹ The notified forest area of Kokrajhar district includes six RFs, namely Guma, Ripu, Kachugaon, Chirang, Bengtal and Manas. The ETF has been carrying out its plantation activities along with the forest department across these RFs.

However, the raising of the ETF has to be situated in the context of the larger environmental and ecological history of India beginning with World War II. During World War II the Indian sub continent became a base for allied operations in West Asia and the Burmese front, leading to a large number of Indian troops being stationed in the country. *Shikar* or hunting surfaced as the most popular form of recreation and due to the continuity of a war, game laws were lax if not non-existent (D'Souza 1994). In an effort to build roads and railways in support of the war, massive forests were cleared in the eastern parts of India. Environmental degradation continued unabated until stringent restraints were applied when Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India in 1966 and environmental protection became *de rigour* with strict implementation guidelines. Shooting was banned and orders often trickled down from the three chiefs of staff to the smallest units and defaulters were punished. Subsequently the Wildlife Protection Act was passed in 1972, the Forest Conservation Act in 1980, the Air (Prevention and control of Pollution) Act was passed in 1981, and as Jayram Ramesh (2017) notes, these acts were almost single handedly pushed through by Mrs. Gandhi at a time when discourses around environmental protection and security were far from being imbibed into both national and international psyche. This was also the period when the military

¹ Interview with a senior officer of the ETF in Kokrajhar

became increasingly conscious of their role in wildlife protection. General P.P. Kumaramangalam, on retirement as army chief, was elected President of the World Wildlife Fund-India (WWF-India) during its formative stages, and numerous other officers, both while in service and after retirement, took leading roles in wildlife and environmental protection (Ramesh 2017). This was the phase in India's ecological history where environmental policies were created and implemented through a central fiat from the top. It is within this historical phase of ecological transition that the creation of the ETF has to be situated.

Using the case of the ETF or the Green Army, this article shall expand on the existing conceptual and theoretical views within the critical conservation literature, by applying it to violent forest space like the BTAD, which has surfaced simultaneously as a site of conservation and counter-insurgency (henceforth COIN) operations as well as inter-institutional competition between the ETF (set up through the mandate of the central government) and the state forest department. Based on empirical evidence gathered through over five months of fieldwork comprising of interviews with officers and workforces of the ETF and the forest department as well as local villagers, from February to May 2016 and subsequently from August to September 2017, I shall further show how the situation in these RFs is a digression from the more general literature on green militarization that expresses conservation as a means to produce violence or how nature conservation regimes produce green war. Instead, my focus shall be on a micro level understanding of how state (ETF, the forest department and the armed forces) and non state actors (local populations and rebel/insurgent groups) operate and interact within each other within a conflict setting especially the ones directly embedded in the conflict process. Although existing literature suggests a merging of counter-insurgency and conservation practices (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018), using an inter-institutional and multilayered approach to conservation, my case demonstrates that counter-insurgency prevails over conservation within the RFs.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I examine the political ecology scholarship on green militarization and the work on environmental security and khaki or militarized conservation in order to extend the literature on military activity, conservation and COIN and the critical geography literature on militarization. The larger literature that deals with other cases of the role of military forces in conservation is reminiscent of some evident patterns which I flag in course of the discussion. The first relates to cases where state managed conservation efforts are militarized in fragile contexts through deployment of armed forces. The later case pertains to the creation of a terrain of warfare against insurgencies and armed criminals (poachers, illegal miners, and timber thieves) by using the legally mandated exclusion of civilians enabled by protected areas to insert armed forces into these areas for combat operations.

Second, I outline the formation of the ETF and situate it within the environmental and forest policy

of India and trace the processes of colonial and post-colonial forest making in India and Assam. I also highlight how the protected areas of BTAD have been a site of conflict and counter-insurgency and how across time-frames the control over the forest and its resources have changed hands, from being fully under militia control to being only partially controlled by the forest department. Within this I draw on the above two instances as presented in the literature and highlight a third instance using the case of the ETF where military habits become a valued skill in carrying out arduous and at times risky conservation work.

Third, I narrow down to the everyday working of the ETF within the RFs in BTAD and its relationship with the forest department. I also highlight that the ETF does not engage in COIN operations and neither does it seek to foster civil-military relations. I conclude by emphasizing on place and site-specific studies of militarization (Bernazzoli and Flint 2009) and argue by empirically situating the working of the ETF within the larger micro political context of the region that despite its best efforts to buffer itself from local violent politics, events and incidents of a political nature seeps into its operations. An additional finding arising out of the state's COIN policy in the context of Assam, as well as other historical and empirical factors indicate the prevalence of COIN over conservation efforts of the ETF as well as the forest department in these protected areas.

6.2 Khaki Conservation or Green Militarization — Conservation, COIN and Conflict

Although, the literature on the engagement of the military in environmental protection or ecological missions or Khaki conservation is still scarce, the role of armed forces in environmental security activities particularly in developing countries is not as well documented as is quite common in the Western democracies these days with dedicated websites and doctrinal references. Yet, militarized forms of conservation especially in developing countries has received harsh criticism within the emerging literature in political ecology focusing on forms of green militarization, work on 'violent environments' (Peluso and Watts 2001) and green violence (Büscher and Ramutsindela 2016), among others. These scholars have argued that conservation by military personnel or representatives of nation-state regimes, often result in the use of excess violence — physical, emotional and structural. Political ecologists and geographers have further acknowledged the use of military tactics, weaponry and even personnel to patrol protected areas (PAs) such as national parks and reserved forests against incursion by those wishing to extract wildlife and other resources (Fletcher 2018), which has been termed as 'green militarisation' (see esp. Duffy 2014; Lunstrum 2014; Duffy et al. 2015; Büscher and Ramutsindela 2016; Kelly and Ybarra 2016). This exercise of physical violence has been accompanied by violent rhetoric advocating often-extreme forms of punishment for the perpetrators

of such incursions (Büscher 2016; Lunstrum 2017). On a similar vein, Joni Seager (1993) asserts that “whether at peace or at war, militaries are the biggest threat to the environmental welfare of our planet” (see also Ehrlich & Birks 1990). Therefore, military environmental discourses seem to justify military control over vast swathes of land and obscure the destructive nature of modern warfare (Pearson 2012).

Drawing from the above discussion, it emerges that military’s role in conservation especially in developing and post-colonial countries goes beyond peaceful means and encompasses within it counter-insurgency (COIN) operations which aid in shaping human-nature relationships, processes of territorialization and resource access and control in relation to protected areas, or reserved forests (RF) in the context of this article (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011). This assumes further significance, when conservation has to be carried out in landscapes scathed in violent conflict, thereby developing a linkages between violence, environment and conflict which has been a forte of Political Geography researchers (Raleigh and Linke 2018; Springer and Le Billon 2016, Benjaminsen et. al. 2017).

6.3 Conservation with Might

Contemporary forms of conservation, as the need to protect endangered species often comes into contact with the lives and rights of people who live in and around the increasingly threatened national parks. A mounting interest in political ecology sutures linkages between conservation, violence and conflict over contested resources in protected areas (PAs) that include wildlife parks and sanctuaries, especially where local, state-led conservation efforts rely on eviction of marginalized peasant communities while promoting tourism and wildlife preservation as a form of capital accumulation (Brockington and Wilkie 2015; Craven 2016; Duffy 2016; Lunstrum 2014; Massé and Lunstrum 2016; Peluso and Watts 2001). Elizabeth Lunstrum (2014) draws a connection between the extensive use of paramilitary forces, technology, military hardware and killings of poachers who challenge the sovereignty of the State, in conservation efforts. Adding to this is a growing body of research addressing what Büscher and Ramutsindela have termed ‘green violence,’ outlined as ‘the deployment of violent instruments and tactics towards the protection of nature’ (2016, 2). The predominant focus of this discussion has been the application of such violence by representatives of nation-state regimes that frequently include forest guards, para-military forces and national armed forces. Using the case of increasing militarization of the Kruger National Park in South Africa, Lunstrum (2014) argues that this is not an isolated instance of such violent form of conservation by the military; rather it reflects a wider and deepening pattern of militarization altering conservation practice around the world. National armed forces, for instance, have performed important roles in establishing conservation measures, often forcibly across South America, Asia and countries across Africa. This has been seen in Guatemala, Colombia, Nepal, Indonesia, Congo, Cameroon, South

Africa, among many others and in case of Botswana, the protection of its national parks is one of its Defense Force's primary responsibilities (Peluso 1993; Henk 2006; Ojeda 2012; Ybarra 2012; Ethirajan 2013; Piombo 2013). In the case of India, drones have recently been introduced in the Kaziranga National Park (KNP) in Assam where around twenty-four persons (allegedly poachers) were killed in and around the core area of KNP in the year 2014 (Barbora 2017). The death toll has risen since then with the arming of forest guards with sophisticated arms and ammunitions and shoot at sight operations.

Some of the earliest and ongoing studies of military activity and the environment have investigated the deep-seated ecological destruction brought about by military activity, especially militarized forms of conflict (Lunstrum 2014). Fashioning on this, Seager has contended that military activities have left a 'chain of militarized environmental destruction that stretches around the world' (1993,14). According to Lunstrum (2014), the crux of these studies espouses the notion that militarized activities, during and post periods of conflict, cause overwhelming harm to the environment, and that the two are indeed antithetical. On a similar vein, Ybarra (2012) has shown in the case of Guatemala how the forest as a site of guerrilla refuge heightened the military's perceived need for army control of the jungle and a territorial strategy to separate nature from civilization and/or agriculture. Duffy (2014) carries this discussion forward by re-emphasizing that this whole notion of "Militarized forms of anti-poaching are not new: for example, early game wardens in British colonial administrations were often ex-military personnel" (2014, 821). In fact the new war for conservation of biodiversity mirrors the language of interventionism and that the onus of wildlife preservation, especially endangered species lies with the international community and that military forms of intervention may be brought into effect to save them (Duffy 2014).

More and more advanced states in the Global North along with NGOs and para-state organizations increasingly connote rural protected areas in economically poorer countries as sites of (in)security which provide opportunities and threats in order to counter deforestation, mitigate loss of biodiversity, postulate ecosystem services and restrict terrorist access to valuable natural resources and nation-state borders (Kelly and Ybarra 2016). This is how conservation paves the way towards securitization, the process by which spaces and subjectivities become targets of regulation and surveillance in the name of security. Kelly and Ybarra term this process as 'green security', "which refers to the overt use of policing and militarization of protected areas vast territories (land or maritime) in the name of security" (2016, 172). The increasing securitization of conservation sites generates, in multiple ways novel *raison d'être* for state militaries in times of post civil war and/or, as it is usually the policing and military agencies that are incorporated into protected area surveillance and enforcement strategies (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011; Ybarra, 2012; Lunstrum, 2014; Dwyer et al., 2016). Moreover, this links to the larger discourse relating to the moral force of conservation,

with the heightened awareness of ecological crisis. Moreover, as has also been highlighted in the literature on political economy of lootable resources and crisis conservation (Le Billon 2004; Duffy 2014; Lunstrum 2012), conservation hotspots and politically fraught areas are often spatially overlapped. The rainforests of the Indian northeast as well as the biodiversity regions of the Indian Himalaya are good illustrations of this. In fact this is where national heritage and security also tend to converge as was seen in the Indian case in the 1960s and has been succinctly described by Mahesh Rangarajan in his volume on *Nature and Nation: Essays on Environmental History*. Rangarajan explained how the protection of nature was equated with protection of heritage. On lines of political economy theses, this resonates with variable incorporation of positions into nature as elements of identity and the strategic use of such identities to wage political struggles. These were the ways in which varieties of nationalism are mediated and constructed through reference to the natural (Rangarajan 2015). Examples of these include and are not restricted to indigenous claims over forestland, protests against dams and developmental projects including SEZs. On the other hand, however, echoing the sentiments of national heritage while nature got nationalized as localized carnivores got renamed as the Indian tiger and the Indian lion, historically forest-dwelling tribal groups suffered and were forced to make nature free of humans.

Dovetailing the increased use of military and/or military strategies often in violent ways in conservation practices, the political ecology of conservation literature argues that one of the primary justifications of the current wave of green militarization is that wildlife crimes including trading in animal parts and/or organs, poaching and hunting, especially in the global south is recurrently driven by insurgent or terrorist groups (Duffy 2016; White 2014). Consequently, combatting such crime through militarized means is presented as an effective way to subdue insurgencies with the two-fold persuasion of conservation and stabilization (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018). The literature discussed above pertains to instances in developing countries or sensitive spaces where state driven or managed conservation enterprise is militarized in politically unstable or trouble regions by deploying armed services personnel to support the work of conservation bureaucracies, or to provide them security while discharging their duties. This often results in forms of violence on local populations as has been discussed in the work on militarized conservation, discussed below.

6.4 Military and not Militarized Conservation

Building from insights in the literature focusing on militarized forms of conservation, Lunstrum (2014) states that those engaged in conservation efforts on the ground have long come with military backgrounds, and even in present times the national Army and police are vital vocations for recruiting forest rangers since military-style discipline and skills are exactly those deemed necessary for effective wildlife policing (Ellis 1994; Neumann 2004; Carruthers 1995; Warchol and Kapla 2012).

Militaries themselves have also been deployed for forcible eviction of populations in order to create, maintain or expand PAs, thereby reflecting one of the core ways in which conservation rests on the use of violence (Peluso 1993; Gibson 1999; Spence 1999; Neumann 2001; Ojeda 2012; Ybarra 2012). Yet, another strand of scholarship within the domain of military diplomacy, security and International Relations, that engage directly with issues of environment and the military tend to either argue against the use of the military in environmental protection or highlight the positive aspects of military's involvement in conservation practices which is supported by improved civil-military relationships, disciplined management of PAs and so on. Geoffrey Dabelko and P. J. Simmons (1997), for instance, assert that engaging the military in nontraditional roles would decrease its operational readiness. Matthias Finger (1991), on the other hand, views the military as a possible solution to the problem of environmental pollution, not a cause. Global militarization, he argues, would lead to the conditions in which environmental crises could only be addressed through crisis management, with the military as a useful tool. However, this would lead to increased pollution from military activities, creating a vicious circle. Another example of the current trend to rethink the connection between environmental pollution and the military is revealed by the case of Latvia. A recent report compiled by the Latvian Ministry of Defense illustrates the preoccupation with environmental pollution of the soil on many military bases formerly used by the Soviet troops stationed there prior to Latvian independence.

The report points to the absence of relevant legislation and management plans to cope with the problem and puts forward the major objectives of the Latvian Government and National Armed Forces in connection to solving this issue, including an increase in civil-military cooperation, such as working with national environmental protection institutions and authorities, as well as ensuring the provision of training through environment- educated managers at all command levels of the Latvian Armed Forces.

This discussion reinforces the possible use of the military to secure environmental protection in other states, beyond the global north. Robyn Eckersley (2012) argues that this is worth exploring for at least two reasons. First, there are still imminent environmental threats, which national governments are grappling with. Second, viewed from this perspective the concepts of sovereignty, nonintervention, and environmental norms come once again under scrutiny. Eckersley (2012) determines that despite the fact that 'eco-humanitarian intervention,' like humanitarian intervention itself, is still 'particularly shaky on the question of political legitimacy, especially from the point of view of many developing countries,' (2007,15), the moral nature of such interventions cannot be completely rejected, especially since it is now reaching a point "where extending the idea of 'responsibility to protect' to include biological diversity is no longer unthinkable" (2007,16). In the case of India, retired major general of the Indian Army, Eustace D'Souza, discussed the

potential use of the Indian army for environmental protection. He argued that although the military establishment has been acknowledged as a powerful force in politics and economy, the positive role that the military can play in “protecting and restoring our degraded environment” is not usually acknowledged (D’Souza 1994, 208). As Duffy (2014) notes, in South Africa, former soldiers from the apartheid-era South African Defense Force (SADF) carved out a new niche in conservation.

Military personnel usually possess similar skills akin to that of forest rangers, comprising of knowledge of weaponry and the ability to plan and carry out operations in remote and tiring terrains and skills necessary to survive in these areas. Therefore, from the mid-1990s the conservation sector increasingly saw the use of private military companies for enforcement as was apparent in the case of Kruger National Park, among others. Pearson (2012) feels that scholarly positions on khaki conservation have become entrenched. Some researchers brand the military as the ‘new defenders of wildlife’ (Cohn, 1996). Harvey Meyerson (2001) dwells on a pro-military historical angle and argues that the US army was instrumental in the creation and survival of Yosemite national park. On a similar note, others like Francois Reitel vies that the military-motivated forest conservation in nineteenth-century France turned the army into proto-ecologists (Pearson 2011). Although environmental security as a concept has found its place in the security discourse at both normative and empirical levels, the role of the military in within this discussion has been largely relegated to the domain of the environment-conflict thesis—that is, to the military’s duty of maintaining internal peace in the event of violent conflict caused by environmental stress (Jayaram 2016).

However, the relationship between military and environment cannot be viewed in terms of binaries and as Jeffrey Sasha Davis reasons, “the relationship between the military and the environment is a much more complex story than merely one of destruction” (2007, 131). This holds particular significance in the context of protected areas (PA) in the global south where the creation and maintenance of such zones is a colonial project enmeshed within unequal power relations. As the discussion above reveals, although the military has the potential to engage in efficient and organized management of biodiversity, the way this potential is operationalized on ground is however a altogether different story. Military operations adopt further significance in contexts where COIN is used in biodiversity conservation (Ybarra, 2012; Verweijen and Marijnen, 2016), as part of larger practices of ‘green militarization’ (Lunstrum, 2014), as well as the securitization of conservation (Neumann, 2004; Duffy, 2016) and the generation of ‘green violence’ (Büscher and Ramutsindela, 2016). Additionally, authors like Osborne (2013) and (Dunlap and Fairhead 2014) have shown how subsequently COIN is also assimilated into forms of ‘green grabbing’ to ‘pacify’ and ‘neutralize’ resistance movements, thereby strengthening or producing new environmental commodity markets.

Not surprisingly, COIN appropriates and is being appropriated by an environmental ethic that facilitates control of populations and territorial expansion. Using cases from Southeast Asia in

the 1950s through the 1970s Peluso and Vandergeest (2011) demonstrate the ways in which both insurgencies and counterinsurgencies have enabled the establishment, extension, and normalization of political forests, for “Insurgency and counterinsurgency brought new political forests into being and vastly extended national forest territories. In due course, particular materialities of tropical forests, including, “biological and ecological properties and spatialities as specific locations and extents facilitated guerrilla warfare” (2011, 589). Peluso and Vandergeest (2011) further add that the relationship between war and forests can be comprehended in relation to a historiography of insurgency in which forests had been important principally as cover for insurgents along with being coveted strategic territory. This in turn led to systematization of military counterinsurgency practices targeted towards regulating forest territories, insurgents, and forest dwellers. In more recent settings, researchers like Ybarra (2012) in the context of Guatemala and Verweijen and Marijnen (2016) in their work on the Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have shown the intimate relationship that exists between conservation and COIN.

The discussion above leads me to identify yet another pattern on military forms of conservation. These occasions rest on the creation of a terrain of warfare against insurgencies and armed criminals (poachers, illegal miners, and timber thieves) by using the legally mandated exclusion of civilians enabled by protected areas to insert armed forces into these areas for combat operations. Conservation areas are then both missions and theaters, respectively, for military personnel and special units.

Nonetheless, what the above literature has only focused on in passing is how conservation on war footing by the state armed forces is carried out in contexts of violent conflict and COIN. Therefore, my attempt here is to empirically demonstrate how wider geographies of prevailing violent conflict feed into the conservation efforts of the ETF especially in the presence of a motley crew of actors operating at different scales, and how they react to the specific challenges of conservation in ‘violent environments’.

6.5 “Our mandate is not COIN” — the Military’s (ETF) Role in Risky Conservation in Assam

Conceptually, the idea of using military in conservation efforts was suggested by Dr. Ernest Borlaug, the father of the green revolution in the early 1980s when he proposed the need for a disciplined force to undertake such tasks as it was beyond repair by civilian agencies. He recommended that the Indian Army on ‘war footing’ should take up the task of environmental protection and restoration. The then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, on observing the ecological degradation in the Himalayas, operationalized the idea by issuing an executive order to form an ETF out of the Territorial Army.

However, the raising of the ETF has to be situated in the context of the larger environmental

and ecological history of India beginning with World War II. During World War II the Indian sub continent became a base for allied operations in West Asia and the Burmese front, leading to a large number of Indian troops being stationed in the country. *Shikar* or hunting surfaced as the most popular form of recreation and due to the continuity of a war, game laws were lax if not non-existent (D'Souza 1994). In an effort to build roads and railways in support of the war, massive forests were cleared in the eastern parts of India. Environmental degradation continued unabated until stringent restraints were applied when Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India in 1966 and environmental protection became *de rigour* with strict implementation guidelines. Shooting was banned and orders often trickled down from the three chiefs of staff to the smallest units and defaulters were punished. Subsequently the Wildlife Protection Act was passed in 1972, the Forest Conservation Act in 1980, the Air (Prevention and control of Pollution) Act was passed in 1981, and as Jayram Ramesh (2017) notes, these acts were almost single handedly pushed through by Mrs. Gandhi at a time when discourses around environmental protection and security were far from being imbibed into both national and international psyche. This was also the period when the military became increasingly conscious of their role in wildlife protection. General P.P. Kumaramangalam, on retirement as army chief, was elected President of the World Wildlife Fund-India (WWF-India) during its formative stages, and numerous other officers, both while in service and after retirement, took leading roles in wildlife and environmental protection (Ramesh 2017). This was the phase in India's ecological history where environmental policies were created and implemented through a central fiat from the top. It is within this historical phase of ecological transition that the creation of the ETF has to be situated.

The primary objective of bringing in the armed forces was to instill discipline and dedication into the whole exercise. Armed forces personnel shared this thought as well, according to whom they could "execute specific ecology-related projects with a military-like work culture and commitment" (Mohan 2005). Conservation, however, was not the sole aim for the creation of the ETF. It encompasses the dual role of conservation as well as rehabilitation of ex-service men of the Indian Army. Since serving personnel could not be withdrawn from regular service, it was proposed that young ex-servicemen from the same region where the environmental activities were to be carried out be recruited for either five years or having an upper limit of forty years of age.

The first battalion of the ETF was commissioned in 1982 with the aim of saving nearly 2500 hectares of deforested mining area in the Shivalik hills (in Shahjahanpur block, near Mussoorie) from turning into a rock-strewn desert. For the next few years, the 127th Infantry Battalion (Garhwal Rifles) worked under the guidance of scientists from the Dehradun-based Central Soil and Water Conservation Research Institute to create a robust watershed management system. By this time, the 128th Infantry Battalion (Rajputana Rifles) had already been deployed (in 1983) in Thar desert in

the state of Rajasthan. The aim was the stabilization of sand dunes and the creation of a greenbelt, covering about 35,000 hectares. The initial successes of the ETFs in the Shivalik hills and the Thar desert inspired other state governments to partner with the central government and establish similar battalions in other ecologically degraded parts of the country like Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Assam. As mentioned, the 175th Battalion was raised in BTAD due to fast depletion of forest cover in the region coupled with instances of recurring political violence where the RF emerged as centrifugal hot spot. As, mentioned earlier these RFs have been a site of conflict and contestation on ethno-religious lines since the early 1980s. The 1990s were a violent period when a series of conflict occurred in 1993, 1994, 1996 and 1998.

At this juncture, I would like to revisit the literature above on militarized forms of conservation to highlight how in the Indian context of raising the ETF battalions, military habits have in actuality become a valued skill in carrying out arduous and at times risky conservation work in such sensitive spaces. I would like to extend this discussion further to encompass the role of retired army personnel who are the major recruits of the ETF, since the scheme encompasses the dual role of conservation as well as rehabilitation of ex-service men of the Indian Army. This idea can be linked to post world war II demobilization of soldiers where it was suggested that carrying out plantation activities in England would not only be therapeutic for the ex-soldiers but also be a gesture in home coming. The idea of protecting the earth with spades after having protected the nation with tanks and guns seemed to be the motivating factor working behind the creation of the ETF. Besides, the aim of rehabilitation, there definitely had to be something more to draw these soldiers into the less glorified task of planting trees and the thought behind it seemed to be that since these ex-servicemen would come back to work in their home states, they would also have a better knowhow about the local flora and fauna. Moreover, tilling and protecting that part of the earth on which one has their ethnic roots along with their fellow ex-servicemen from similar terrains would act as a motivating factor for these *jawans*. This was also evident during the time I spent at the ETF camp and plantation sites, where the officer seemed quite clueless and it was the *jawans* who spoke in fluent Bodo and Assamese and gave me a detailed taxonomy of the various species of saplings in the greenhouse, their germination processes, plantation and after care. Thus, in this context it is these abilities and traits of retired military personnel have come to be the desired attributes when they are redeployed as peaceful conservation workers. This goes on to highlight the fact that the inherent violence of conservation, that often begins with displacements and exclusions (of unwanted human settlements) and confinements and surveillance of preserved non-human species and organisms, against the care and restoration aspect of conservation work that seeks to engender protected lives and sustain valued communities of plants and animals.

6.6 Conflict and Conservation in the RFs

Assam's contemporary politics has been defined by political violence on ethno-linguistic and religious lines since the 1980s. The conflicts nonetheless coincide with contemporary concerns for conservation that had emerged following a period when insurgents took refuge in Manas National Park, which I discuss below, even though conserving areas for wildlife go back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when it was introduced (by the colonial administration) amid protests from local peasants (Barbora 2017). The violence in BTAD also commenced during the 1980s. The Bodoland Movement, being the Bodo movement for a separate state, came to an end in 2003. The Bodoland Territorial Council was then established and BTAD was formed.

However, violence on ethno-religious lines erupted again in 2008, 2012 and twice in 2014 claiming over hundreds of lives and displacing over a hundred thousand people. Most of the violent episodes took place inside the RFs. The first major attack hit the Manas RF and in 1996 and 1998 the violence struck entire parts of northern Kokrajhar district and the worse casualties occurred in the RFs bordering Bhutan (Kimura 2018). In the following decade the violence of 2008 and 2014 affected the Chirang, Riphu and Kachugaon RFs. Historically, the Bodos, who are also the largest plain tribe of northeast India, consider themselves to be the autochthons of the region and claim ownership over these forests. However, during the colonial times large-scale immigration took place from Bengal and Bengali Muslim peasants were settled in western Assam. Adivasis comprising of Santhal, Orao and Munda tribes were also brought in to work in the expanding tea plantations as well as building of the railways. Some tribes were also recruited to work in definite forest zones in timber plantations. Since the local populations were often hesitant to do this, the abovementioned tribes were brought in from Bihar, Odhisa and central India. Soon enough cultivable land became scarce which forced Bodo peasants to move into RFs and eventually being termed as 'encroachers', despite this being the land of their ancestors who used it for cultivation and also as a trade route with Bhutan. In the post-colonial period the adivasis also began to settle in the RFs, which posed a direct threat to the Bodos. However, immigration and faulty land policies is not a sufficient explanation for the raging and continuing violence in the region. According to Vandekerckhove and Suykens (2010) it was the commoditization of forests and the implantation of tea estates that led to the creation of restrictive boundaries furthering entrapment of the tribal communities living in the area, especially the Bodo. Added to this, the insufficient responses of both the Indian and Assam governments to this increasing entrapment have furnished the basis for the organization of violent movements. The situation worsened when in the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, new restrictive forest rules and regulations were introduced under the banner of 'protection', since by then over eighty percent² of the forest had become inaccessible. Thereafter, in 1987 the movement

² See BTC, Profile on Forest and Wildlife of Bodoland Territorial Council (Kokrajhar: Forest Department, n.d.), p.10.

became violent with the launch of insurgent group called the Bodo Security Force (BSF). Overtime BSF split into the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and a wing of NDFB led by Songbijit or the NDFB(S) is active till date and were responsible behind the most latest episode of violence against adivasis in the Chirang RF in December 2014. The Manas National Park on the border of Bhutan was declared a wildlife sanctuary and a subsequent tiger reserve in 1973. In fact, most of the plantation drive carried out by the ETF is on the fringes of Manas. Conversely, in 1992 Manas was declared a 'World Heritage Site in danger', a label attached to the reserve as a result of the Bodo insurgency (Vandekerckhove and Suykens 2010). Conservation in Manas was culminated into a face-off between the state and the insurgents, resulting in a shift in control over the contested forest territories. The insurgents extracted timber and engaged in poaching to fund militant activities while simultaneously using the forest as passage to their bases in Bhutan. The park lost almost 90 per cent of its rhinos (close to 100) and a large number of swamp deer and wild buffaloes as a result of the unrest³. Soon the forest guards became the main targets that eventually led to the departure of the forest department and closure of the park from 1989 to 1995.

Although in 2007, four years after the creation of BTAD, the forest department had started rebuilding forest offices in the Chirang, Riphu and Kachugaon RFs, forest rangers till date are scared to reside in the interior forest. In 2010, the minister for Tourism and Forest in BTAD constituted the Bodoland Forest Protection Volunteers (BFPV), a 100 man volunteer group comprising of members who lived in and around the forest areas, along with the aid of some local environmental NGOs. The BFPV was set up to assist the forest department in anti poaching and anti smuggling activities. Initially the BTC provided the members with support for uniforms and set up camps inside forest to exercise surveillance. Some funds were also allocated towards a lump sum salary for these volunteers. This organization did work for a few years, but in 2015 when I interviewed one of the founding members, I was told that the lack of bare minimum financial and bureaucratic support and guidance on regular basis, the whole initiative had an adverse effect on the initial conservation zeal of the community. The group now barely consists of twenty irregular volunteers and most of them actively participated in and carried out political campaigns on behalf of the ruling political party and the minister of forest during elections. As one of the volunteers recounted, "since we don't get a salary anymore this is the only way we can get access to some part-time contractual jobs. However, we continue to support the forest department in whichever way we can".

The recurring conflict over the years led to a steep rise in the number of army and para-military forces who have now become a permanent part of the forest landscape. Given the sensitive location of the RF with borders with Bhutan and the RF emerging as a centrifugal space of conflict, COIN and rehabilitation of those displaced in violence, these armed forces have had to be stationed inside

³ See <https://www.sahapedia.org/manas-national-park-those-living-the-fringe-areas>

or in the vicinity of the RF. Due to paucity of infrastructure in these remote locations, with a directive from the state home affairs and district administration most of the forest guesthouses have had to be converted into camps for the army and para-military to facilitate COIN operations and also protect the forest dwellers. Although Manas is now open to the general public, at least 100 people were displaced and more than forty Bengali-speaking Muslims were killed on May 2, 2014, when NDFB(S) militants opened fire in the villages near Manas National Park. Fieldwork with the forest department in the RFs soon revealed that the NDFB(S) rebels are still pursuing to control the inner parts of the forest, by launching attacks on forest guards and forest dwellers they are trying to define who has access to resources and who does not.

I must also mention here that unlike the Kaziranga National Park (KNP) in Assam, which has developed into a site of serious contestations about the idea of conserving nature in colonized spaces, leading to the outright militarization of the park and celebration of the killings of alleged rhino poachers (Barbora 2017), COIN still remains a prerogative even at the cost of conservation within and around Manas. It has been widely acknowledged that Kaziranga's success in protecting the Indian one-horned rhino is majorly because of extreme often militarized methods like shoot at sight used there (Balmford 2012; Saikia 2009). Although the partial departure of the forest department and extensive deforestation led to the setting up of the 135 Battalion of the ETF, conservation by the armed forces in Kokrajhar district is in no way comparable to processes of green militarization as seen in KNP in India and elsewhere. In fact, I recently asked an ecologist who works with an environmental NGO for conservation inside the Manas National Park about the conservation situation in KNP *vis-e-vis* Manas and his response was clear, "we cannot compare Manas and KNP either in terms of environmental protection protocols and/or poaching activities." Given that as recently as June 2017, about forty NDFB(S) rebels were found to be taking shelter in and around Manas⁴, it becomes obvious that COIN operations take over conservation in such a context. This also stands contrary to what authors like Barbora (2017) argue, that in the last decade, instances of armed encounters between insurgents and security personnel had reduced considerably leading to expansion of tourism, particularly around the main national parks in the state. While this holds true in the case of the KNP but cannot necessarily be extended to capture the conservation COIN conundrum in Manas and the RFs that surround it. This resonates with Verweijen and Marijnen (2018) notion that the extent to and the mechanisms by which conservation and counterinsurgency converge are context dependent. Although the literature reveals certain similarities in the practices that relating to both militarized conservation and counterinsurgency including violent rationalities such as 'shoot-on-sight' and 'shoot-to-kill' policies, property destruction, threats, evictions, displacements, patrolling, surveillance and the construction of informant networks (Verweijen and Marijnen 2018), in the

⁴ See <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/this-assam-national-park-now-a-sanctuary-for-bodo-militants/20150617.htm>

RFs in BTAD such practices are firstly, primarily aimed at COIN operations and carried out by the Army and para-military forces. Secondly, exercises like eviction, displacement and threats are the decree of the forest department aimed at those encroaching forestland, illegally. The motley crew of actors operating within the RFs has their roles clearly defined and COIN and conservation does not usually converge. As a senior officer of the ETF recounted, “we have a clear mandate. We do not involve ourselves in COIN and neither are we here to foster civil-military relationship. It is the forest department that is supposed to interact with the local populations. From time to time we distribute saplings to villagers to create awareness about the environment and also employ them under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) to assist in our plantation activities, but that is where our interaction ends.” It is in this milieu that I would like to highlight the ensuing relationship between the forest department and the ETF in regard to conservation.

6.7 The Forest Department and the ETF — Community Engagement, Inter-Institutional Competition and Local Politics

The more recent attack on the Adivasi population by the NDFB (S) in December 2014, led to the setting up of relief camps for the quarter million people who fled their villages again, inside the RFs. A visit to the RFs in January 2015 indicated the improvement in the security situation as compared to the heydays of the Bodo insurgency in the mid 1990s; nevertheless political power was far from being completely in the hands of the ruling government. The Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) might have ended their fight more than a decade ago with the creation of BTAD, yet the militia of the NDFB(S) do not seem to have any intention of putting down the arms for good. Eventually, over the years, the forest department had devised a form of forest politics rested predominantly on negotiation and only selective contestation towards forest crime fuelled by the discrepancy between the rigid forest laws since the 1980s and the lack of financial means or local support to implement these.

Although rebel groups continue to strive to define access to and use of natural resources like timber and poaching, interviews with forest dwellers revealed that the forest department was still regarded as a main protector of the forest responsible for eviction operations and penalizing forest crime. The forest department’s physical presence in the interior parts of the forest is still remains scarce, but this has not adversely affected the states recognition within the forest. It appears that in the years of militia violence the desire for state presence in the forest villages had actually grown, and this is discernible given the large presence of the armed forces inside the RFs. In 2007, the 135th battalion of the ETF was created to restore extreme forest degradation in the RFs and specifically

plant in the interior areas of the forest where the departure of the forest department had created a void.

It ought to be mentioned that the forest is a transferred subject in the BTAD, meaning that when the BTAD was constituted in 2003, the department of forest was transferred to the council from the Assam state and now comes under the jurisdiction of the department for forest and tourism of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The ETF has a very clear mandate in BTAD, which is to restore forest cover through plantation drives. The ETF does organize activities with villagers in their plantation areas from time to time to create awareness about environmental protection, but it is usually done with the support of the forest department and the instances of these are rare. Moreover, exchanges with officers of the ETF indicated that although the ecological forces in other states are more engaged and work closely with the local communities, especially in the states of Uttarakhand, Rajasthan and Delhi, in a place like BTAD they have to be on alert and guarded given the fragile political environment. Therefore, there has not been any transformation in civil-military relations due to the coming of the ETF, who maintain their distance from the civilian population. However, what has been an interesting development is the transformative while simultaneously derogative relationship among the ETF, the forest department, the regular army and the local administration. The Planning Commission (October 2011, 40) in a report mentions that: “the establishment and operational expenditure on the ETF Battalions raised by Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reimbursed by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF)” while operational assistance like provision of saplings, fencing, as well as overall professional and managerial guidance has to be provided by the respective state forest departments. The ex-servicemen recruited are preferably from within the region of operation, “where as the nuclear core of the force is constituted of regular servicemen”. This entails that the ETF would have to both rely on and communicate with the forest department and maintain a close working relationship especially in a hostile environment as that of BTAD. Yet another major hurdle the ETF faces, as pointed out by the officers is encroachment of forestland. Occasionally land allocated to the ETF is encroached by certain ethnic groups or the community let loose their cattle which destroys saplings. As an officer noted,

Encroachment seems to be considered almost legal in these areas (sic). We have tried bringing this up with the forest department as well as the local administration but to no avail.... there is a lot of political pressure and at the moment it is just about maintaining the status quo and not undertake any eviction operations. Who knows may be the state itself settles these people on forestland?

The local social and political circumstances seep into the ETF’s conservation efforts, revealing the different objectives of the forest department, army, local administration and the ETF that does not ally. Besides, the officers of the ETF deem the forest department officials to be “lazy, corrupt and

useless” and often have to “be pushed and given constant (personal) reminders”⁵ to attend events and (awareness) meetings on conservation and planning organized by the ETF. Moreover, as mentioned in the Planning Commission document, it is the responsibility of the forest department to supply the ETF with saplings for plantation, but in BTAD the ETF has created and currently maintains several nurseries and instead from time to time provides saplings to the forest department. They also do not rely on the quality of saplings provided by the forest department and maintain their own nurseries and vermin-composts to ensure quality saplings with better survival rates. Given the existence of rampant illegal logging especially of high value woods like *Sal*, *Gamari* and teak, the ETF mostly plant medicinal and fruit trees (like mangoes, gooseberry, guava, black berries, date palm etc.) in their plantation drives, which in the long run is also beneficial for the local communities.

The officers of the ETF sense that they have been forced to take up some of the workload of the Forest Department in terms of maintaining the nurseries, creating awareness programs and even communicating with village headmen regarding plantation drives around the respective villages, which should ideally be done by the forest department. In following with the protocol, 300 hectares of land per year is handed over to the ETF by the forest department for plantation for a minimum period of five years. In the first year, they prepare the ground and soil and plant the saplings. In the second year, a tree count is carried out and dead saplings are replaced. The forest department is required to monitor and take account the progress of the plantation site, annually. At the end of five years of monitoring progresses, the area is handed over to the forest department. This is where the discord arises, since to begin with the forest department do not carry out the annual monitoring of the sites and additionally when the plantation site is handed over after five years, the forest department habitually come up with excuses, besides finding flaws and eventually refuse and/or delay taking over the site, thereby rendering additional burden on the ETF. Since forest comes under the jurisdiction of the BTC and the ETF is under the MoD the whims of the forest department prevails. This seems to be a case of conflicting jurisdiction within the federal structure, especially in an area where the state is very much present and is neither fragile nor collapsed. The officers of the forest department did not seem to consider the ETF important enough and instead felt like they were treading on the department’s erstwhile territories. Although the ETF makes every attempt to include the forest department in its activities the latter does not seem too keen to participate and as a ranger said, “we are already overworked and do not have time to attend these functions and train these people.” In recent times, senior officers have been sent to the Forest Research Institute (FRI) in Dehradun for training in techniques of seed dormancy pre-treatments, seed storage, clonal propagation of bamboo and nursery techniques of important tree species of Assam. Once back, they disseminate the learning among others, usually sub-ordinates. Despite prevailing frictions,

⁵ Excerpt from an interview with field officers of the ETF.

what emerged from the various interviews is that both parties have come to realize know that it is a relationship of dependency and over time have established mutual tolerance and refrain from stepping on the other's toe. The ETF is aware of the corrupt practices of the forest department and their alleged linkages with the timber mafia, but they have decided to stay quiet about this. If at all they encounter logging or poaching activities during their plantation drives, they report it to the forest department or the local administration. The forest department has the added advantage of having historical dominance over the forests. For the villagers the ETF are outsiders that plant trees and do not necessarily interact with them unlike the forest department. Moreover, the ETF has to rely on the Army and the forest department, since the latter works in close conjecture with the local communities residing in the RFs for safety information relating to insurgent and COIN operations, I shall revisit this point in the next section. Over time however, the forest department has come to the realization that it shall not be able to match the efficacy of the ETF and nor will it be able to venture into areas deep inside the forests, till rebels continue to operate in the region.

Since, the ETF has to work with and under the supervision of the forest department, the scales tilt in the latter's favor. As the above shows, there are resource and authority issues between these two institutional structures, but at the same time there also exists strained collaboration as expertise and control become exchangeable.

6.8 The ETF and the Local Political Context

As it stands, conservation activities even in relatively peaceful settings can be daunting since it often necessitates fencing off forestland which villagers use as grazing land, or clearing of encroached land often leading to contestations with local populations. However, conservation in the BTAD, which falls under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA),⁶ is particularly challenging for the ETF, since the image of the army or the paramilitary is synonymous with rape, abduction, torture and killings. Interestingly the ETF was not only brought into BTAD for its discipline but also their uniform, which is the same as the regular Army. Furthermore, the forest department's appeal for advanced weapons or additional security inside interior forest was met with deaf ears. In an interview, an officer of the ETF said to me "local population cannot distinguish between regular Army and us and usually view us with similar awe and fear". So, the ETF carries out their plantation drives in interior forestlands where in principle their uniforms (are supposed to) act as deterrents for

⁶ AFSPA, 1958, gives armed forces special power to maintain public order in disturbed areas. They have the authority to prohibit a gathering of five or more persons in an area, can use force or even open fire after giving due warning if they feel a person is in contravention of the law. If reasonable suspicion exists, the army can also arrest a person without a warrant and also shoot; enter or search a premises without a warrant; and ban the possession of firearms.

villagers as well as insurgents who would otherwise engage in logging, hunting and encroachment activities. As already mentioned the regular army is extremely unpopular among the local population given the continuing COIN operations along with incidences of rape, torture and abduction. Since the villagers cannot usually differentiate between the ETF and the regular army, it appears as though a Janus faced Army is at play, which is on the one hand trying to protect the ecology and on the other killing and torturing at random. The relationship between the forest communities and the forest department was based predominantly on negotiation and the latter exercised only selective contestation towards forest crime. Besides fear and uncertainty brought about by political conflicts, this was also due to the unavailability of adequate human and financial resources at the disposal of the forest department for such interventions. Due to this mediated rule the state could survive the hostile environment of rebel dominance over the years and even came out stronger as its legitimacy rose with time.

A senior officer with the ETF also pointed out the drawback it creates for the ETF in terms of additional threats and mistaken identity. As is frequently the case in such sensitive spaces of violent rebel led conflict, the militant groups are regularly in contact with the local villagers and retain informants in interior villages. As the officer related, their presence also leads to the villagers reporting on them to the militants who then presume that the ETF is undertaking COIN operations. Although the officer added “in case we stumble upon any solid *intel*, we pass it on to the regular army. This though is extremely rare”⁷, given their mandate. When I spoke to the village headman of one of the villages situated next to the plantation site, he did not seem slightly baffled as to why the ETF was so fearful of the local situation. He further recounted,

This is the last village beyond which we have the plantation site and then flows the *Saralbhangra* river on the banks of which lies Bhutan. This has been a corridor for illegal activities, smuggling of timber and also movement of insurgents. Of course we had insurgents frequenting our village, but in recent times insurgency seems to have declined. The ETF ask us things like if the insurgents extort money, if the area is safe and look at us for reassurance it seems. We used to be scared of the ETF at the beginning but not much anymore. Usually they call us once a month to check on the insurgency situation.

This however, does not in any way translate into the ETF or the forest department being engaged in COIN. What emerges from the above discussion is that conservation on war footing within the recurring conflict context of BTAD is characterized by non-aligned inter-institutional competition among the motley crew of state and non-state actors, who usually have their individual directives

⁷ Excerpt from interview(s) with personnel of ETF.

to fulfill and act upon. Although COIN over the years against militants and vengeful attacks has played a role in shaping human-nature relationships (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011) within the RFs especially in relation to determining access to and control over forest spaces and resources, but the case of RFs does not essentially feed into the debate on the application of COIN in biodiversity conservation (Ybarra, 2012; Verweijen and Marijnen, 2016), as part of wider processes of ‘green militarization’ (Lunstrum, 2014). I would like to substantiate this claim with an incident that ensued between the NDFB (S) militants and the ETF. On the morning of October 2014 a heavily armed group of about seventy NDFB(S) cadre ambushed a team of the ETF while they were carrying out plantation activities in the *Khalasi* area inside the Chirang-Riphu RF. The militants outnumbered the green army and snatched seven INSAS rifles along with magazines. Although this is the official version as reported in local newspapers, according to local villagers not only did the militants loot the members of the ETF but also took a lift in the latter’s truck to a certain site. There have been similar instances where personnel of paramilitary forces have been waylaid and executed by rebel groups. Post this confrontation, the ETF abandoned this specific plantation site and also moved their base camp and nursery from inside the RF to Bismuri, closer to Kokrajhar town. The entry to the base camp is extremely restricted and interestingly the villagers who live around the camp view the ETF as regular army and presume have been stationed for their protection.

This signifies that despite the numerous efforts the ETF makes to buffer itself from local politics, incidents of a violent nature invariably affect conservation practices. This also leads to the ETF relying even more on the regular Army and the forest department as well as local villagers. Since this incident the ETF is often accompanied by a small group of army personnel when they go into interior areas for plantation. Interviews conducted with villagers who live close to plantation sites revealed that before starting plantation projects, the ETF personnel often have informal meetings with members of the village council and request them to keep the ETF abreast of any recent happenings pertaining to security in the area or if they happen to site insurgent activities. The fact that the ETF finds itself in a vulnerable position both in terms of self protection and also everyday interaction with the forest department, points to the deployment of a central body in a conflict zone, seeking co-operation from the state government. Conservation by a unit of the Indian army along with the forest department in a militarized zone where COIN and conservation do not necessarily align adds to Lunstrum’s (2014) call for place-specific studies of militarization that are still sparse.

In the context of the RF in BTAD, the process of conservation is a combination of cooperation and co-inhabitation in the forest areas. The hostility and resignation with which different agencies are viewed by the local communities as well as the way they perceive and relate to each other becomes important both to the relative effectiveness of conservation activity but also the extent to which violence is actually bred or exacerbated by this activity.

6.9 Concluding Remarks

Using the case of the ETF as an entry point, I have shown how in the context of the RFs in BTAD, the joint roles of the ETF, the forest department and the active rebel groups in prevention of illegal logging, access to control over resources and encroachment by local populations renders conservation and environment only a second fiddle to issues around counter-insurgency and national security. As the literature discussed shows, there tends to be three emerging narratives about the role of military in society with respect to the environment. One is that the environment and national security stand opposed to one another, the other lends to the notion that environment needs to bend if national security is an issue and final conception brings together the military and paramilitary personnel, training, technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation efforts with a larger goal of COIN and preservation of national security. In the case at hand, COIN and securitization remains the forte of the regular army; eviction operations lie with the forest department and intense afforestation and soil conservation is the domain of the ETF. The non-convergence of COIN and conservation here is also explained by the coming together of regimented bureaucracies in environmental operations, along with local and historical factors operating alongside conservation.

Additionally, conservation by the military does not in all occasion transform into militarization of the environment, as this case has shown. There is always a risk of this happening as has been seen closer home in KNP, that boasts of a remarkable conservation success, with considerable costs, including human lives. In spaces where the nation-state is more vested with fighting insurgency and separatist tendencies and the preservation of law and order is of paramount importance, COIN shall invariably prevail over conservation and the coalition among the various state and non-state actors will be steered towards this goal. Therefore, I expect my findings to have resonance beyond Assam and India, as similar conservation and coalition approaches are likely to exist elsewhere. In this article, I have drawn precise conceptual linkages between the political geography and political ecology literature on ‘violent environments’, crisis conservation and green militarization and the broader work on military security and violent conflict. I have expanded empirically on the concepts of ‘violent environment’ and green militarization by applying it to spaces like the RFs in BTAD where the politics of conservation is embedded in a larger context of violent conflict and inter-institutional competition. Using the case of ETF, I have also argued and demonstrated how conservation by a wing of the Indian army in sensitive borderland spaces does not lead to the convergence of COIN and conservation. I have further shown how localized conservation practices are intertwined with micro conflict dynamics and inadvertently perturb both the ETF and the forest department. Finally, I have also indicated how conservation on war footing in actual zones of conflict encompasses a range of different state and non-state actors, operating at different scales and their reaction and adaptation to the specific challenges of conservation in ‘violent environments’ and a non-alignment

of their functional goals related to COIN and conservation.

A line of inquiry worth exploring would be to arrive at both analytically and conceptually middle ground within the conservation-COIN nexus, especially when using national armed forces for conservation operations. The goal is to find sustainable futures for both people and the ecology which requires coalitions that work together.

6.10 References

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7 A Phenomenological Exploration of Lived Experiences of Violence in Northeast India.

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Abstract

Using a framework of phenomenology of lived experiences to analyse conflict narratives of interlocutors living in crisis contexts of an on-going ethnic violence since the 1970s in the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) in Assam, this paper seeks to explore how exposure to repeated cycles of violence influences temporalities. Does a past experience of violence make one more resilient to a similar suffering occurring in future, or when violence strikes for the second time one is relegated right back to that past? How does one migrate both psychologically and physiologically through this process of living through uncertainty in their own homes to temporary relief camps? How do people memorize an episode of violence and translate it in their everyday mediations, negotiations and socio-political relations?

7.1 Introduction

The Bodoland Territorial Autonomous Districts (BTAD) in the state of Assam in northeast India can be described as a landscape of terror since it has been a stage for recurrent, mostly violent contestations on ethno-religious lines since over four decades. Over the years, the violence has claimed more than thousand lives and displaced millions. The first phase of violence was unleashed through the Bodo struggle for a separate state within the territory of India, with two central rebel groups- the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) leading the cause, in the early 1980s. The long drawn battle between the rebel groups and the Indian Army as well as the Paramilitary, led to over a decade of curfews, shooting at sight, abductions, bomb blasts and targeted killings. In 1993, the first Bodo Accord was signed, however it's provisions failed to please many, and so the BLT emerged in 1996, unbridling a reign of terror. Finally in 2003, a tripartite agreement among the BLT, the government of Assam and the Indian state led to the surrender of the BLT and the creation of the BTAD, comprising of the districts of Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Chirang and Baksa. However, the NDFB refused to participate and one faction of the movement NDFB(S or Songbijit) has remained active until today.

The BLT (trans) formed into a political party called the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), which has been in power ever since. Meanwhile, the NDFB went into ceasefire and there have been several offshoots of the group over the years, which continue to engage in periodic episodes of violence for a separate state of Bodoland. Since the inception of BTAD, there have been over twelve reported episodes of violence¹ between the Bodos and Adivasis as well as the Bodos and Bengali Muslims, the most prominent ones being in 2007, 2008, 2012 and twice in 2014. Prior to 2003, ethnic violence occurred in 1993, 1996, and 1998.

To give a brief overview into the context of this conflict, the Bodos who are the largest plain tribes within the northeast India, at present constitute 29 per cent of the population in BTAD, followed by the Rajbonshis (fifteen per cent), Bengali Muslims (about twelve to thirteen percent), and Santhals who are an Adivasi group make up six percent. There is a perception of massive illegal migration from Bangladesh, which has generated a fear psychosis among the Bodo community that their ancestral lands will be illegally taken away by these migrant Muslims. The lack of any reliable data on the number of people coming in from Bangladesh into Assam further aggravates this situation. Moreover, the inclusion of the names of the so called illegal migrant in the voters list is seen as a deliberate strategy by some outside force to empower an outside group against the Bodos, so that the latter lose their sense of distinct indigenous identity. Moreover, the existence of armed groups like the NDFB (the anti talks faction), the Birsas and the Cobra Commando Force representing the Santhal Adivasis has further contributed to repeated cycles of violence (Goswami 2012). Hence, this inter-generational experience of living through uncertainty and violence has and continues to shape the social and economic structures and everyday transactions. That the Muslims and Adivasis feel a constant sense of vulnerability has been wrought about due to repeated attacks against them. Notwithstanding the fact that the dominant ethnic group, the Bodos also bear both cultural and physical fate akin to the Muslims and Adivasis orchestrated through retaliatory forms of violence against them.

With this backdrop, when I entered the region in 2009. What stared me in the face was a landscape scattered with narratives of fear, terror, violence and uncertainty. Drawing from and expanding on Henrik Vigh's idea of crisis context, where he argues that instead of placing crisis in context, the need is to view crisis itself as context – as a terrain of action and meaning, thereby opening this up for ethnographic exploration (Vigh 2008), I propose a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of those living through these chronic crisis context in the BTAD. Such an exploration feeds into the need for what I term an intimate ethnography of the region and those who have suffered- my interlocutors, especially since the past decade forms of non-traditional and humanistic

¹ See http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/data_sheets/BTAD.htm

ethnography with a goal of reaching out has been gaining momentum in anthropology, through the works of Veena Das (2007), Henrik Vigh (2008), Sverker Finnstrom (2008) and more recently Townsend Middleton (2015). These scholars have engaged in peeling political and social violence layer by layer and interrogated the production and maintenance of agency in contexts of extreme suffering and uncertainty.

Moreover, phenomenological approaches have continued to gain significance in anthropology throughout the past twenty-five years. These approaches have helped anthropologists “to reconfigure what it means to be human, to have a body, to suffer and to heal, and to live among others” (Desjarlais and Thoop 2011). Therefore, as Desjarlais and Thoop (2011) further state, “to study experience from a phenomenological perspective is to recognize the necessary emplacement of modalities of human existence within ever-shifting horizons of temporality”. For, the human existence is temporally structured in ways that the past experience is always retained in a present moment that is feeding forward to anticipate future horizons of experience. Duranti (2010) points out that Husserl’s rendering of the natural attitude “closely resonates with what anthropologists understand to be the cultural configuration of reality”. To this extent, as Duranti (2010:18) suggests, the “natural attitude” might just as well be termed the “cultural attitude”. By developing on Husserl’s phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty views the individual as the body itself, within a time and place, performing in the world in which it lives. For Merleau-Ponty the body is ‘our anchor in the world’, or ‘our general means of holding on to a world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 239). Such an approach focuses on the reading of social behavior as ‘the study of human lived experience and that human experience is rooted in people’s meanings, interpretations, activities and interactions’ (Prus 1996: 9). Therefore, one of the more instrumental influences of phenomenology to contemporary phenomenological anthropology becomes apparent in the tradition’s focus on embodiment, where the body is not only an object that is available for scrutiny. It is also a locus from which our experience of the world is arrayed. The objective of a phenomenological method is, therefore, to describe the full structure of an experience lived, or what that experience meant to those who lived it. Every armed conflict therefore, consists of an accumulated mass of small details, which linger as facts, figures and memories in people’s attempt to make social life and a living beyond the conflict and especially when it comes to war and peace, every case needs its own context (Richards 2005: 14).

Drawing from over fifteen months of ethnographic research spanning over four years from 2014 to 2017 consisting of participant observation, in depth interviews, life histories, informal conversations across multiple villages and relief camps set up at the immediate aftermath of conflict, my focus has been on the minute rather than spectacular manifestations of agency in the everyday. In this article, I shall focus on the everyday narratives across two cases- the first is a village that was torched during an episode of violence in 2012 and fieldwork was conducted in 2014 and subsequently in

2015 and 2016. The second site is a temporary relief camp set up after the conflict in December 2014, where fieldwork was carried out from January to May 2015. The narratives reveal how within the immediate context of a temporary relief camp, the abject loss and magnitude of suffering is visible through imageries of physical destruction of property, bullet injuries on bodies and extreme emotions either through hysterical outburst or haunting silences. Whereas within the gradual context of a village, two years after the episode of conflict it is the memories that begin to take shape and everyday chores are exercised with caution and imposition of restricted mobility in social interactions. Although the material culture of violence lingers, physical violence ceases to be the centrifugal part of life, at least temporarily.

Using a cross case comparison, I show how the body understands, feels and interacts with textures and objects of everyday life. Since this notion of lived experience relates to how members of subjugated groups find themselves in the world, make sense of the external world, and through their actions actively (re) shape their world, my proposition in this article is to interrogate, compare and capture the temporalities of lived experience across the two cases. This I believe, aids in an intimate understanding of how temporality or time alters people's experiences in terms of the affect conflict has on people's bodies and senses.

In the following sections, I shall first provide a brief description about the two cases, and how I draw from existing theoretical insights within the broader debate on anthropology of conflict and apply it to these cases by focusing on lived experiences. By weaving the various narratives and observations gathered through ethnographic fieldwork, I compare the temporalities of the ordinary and the everyday to highlight the fluidity of these categories, which become pronounced at the wake of certain events. Using temporality as a central trope, the analysis of the cases reveal how people transcend from the lifeworld of the camp to that of the village.

7.2 The Two Cases — Sites of Violence and Methodology

My first case is the village of Misalmari², inhabited solely by Bengali speaking Muslims. This village was attacked by the Bodos in July 2012 and was completely charred and gutted. In the words of one of my interlocutors, "it was the 19th of July, 2012 when uncontrolled violence commenced and spread like a virus"³. The population lived in make shift relief camps for over ten months and some up to a year before rebuilding and returning to their village in 2013. I conducted fieldwork in Misalmari, first in 2014 and subsequently in 2015 and 2016. The second case is a makeshift relief camp comprising of Santhal Adivasis from seven villages, located within the Ultapaani reserved forests. The villages were attacked by militants belonging to the National Democratic Front of

² Names of persons and villages have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

³ All interviews were conducted in the local languages, Bengali and Assamese and the excerpts are my translation.

Bodoland' anti-talk Songbijit faction in December 2014. Later the NDFB(S) claimed responsibility of the attacks and also stated that this was done to make their present felt and continue the movement for a separate state of Bodoland. This relief camp was set up deep inside the reserved forest on the Indo-Bhutan border where I conducted fieldwork at the immediate aftermath, from January to April 2015. Since, it was difficult to follow all the families that lived in this camp, I was able to follow families from at least two villages and conduct fieldwork with them subsequently in 2016.

I visited Misalmari, first in April 2014 when the residents were beginning to return and rebuild their homes and lives after having spent over ten months in makeshift relief camps. Misalmari had also been the site of violence in 1996. The calcined remains of the sole primary school around which the village was built, was still visible from the main mud road that led into the village and was the site of the local market which consisted of a homeopathic pharmacy, a cassette store, a butcher shop and a tea-stall where every evening the villagers gathered to discuss their lives, local politics and business, among other things. It is here that I often sat and engaged in detailed conversations and discussions for hours. Invariably, their thoughts gyrated towards that sultry summer evening in July 2012, when their village was set on fire, ten people were shot dead, over ten went missing and several injured while they ran for cover. At first they took shelter inside the primary school, to escape from the bullets that were being fired by the attackers. The Indian para-military forces came in the meantime and started shooting the perpetrators from the other side. After being cramped up inside the school for several hours, the villagers were escorted by the military to a nearby relief camp. Two days later, when a few men returned to the village, all that remained were ashes. As I started visiting the households, each time I was told, "my entire house was burnt down, I lost all my cows and crops. I still have not fixed my tin roof since I am scared they might come and burn it all down".

As already mentioned, the second case is a temporary relief camp, comprising of residents primarily from seven Adivasi villages, located deep inside the reserved forest where in December 2014, attacks were carried out by the NDFB(S) faction. The relief camp was a makeshift arrangement, with tarpaulin tents in blue donated by an NGO and one tube-well as the only source of drinking water, serving about three hundred people. This camp was strategically set up in a field opposite to the walled compound of the Border Security Forces (BSF). The people of this camp had also faced another episode of violence in 1998, and had moved into their houses inside the reserved forest, barely a few years ago, after having received compensation from the government for their losses in 1998. They acknowledged that their proximity to the forest meant that they would often have to feed and shelter NDFB(S) militants and they tried to maintain a cordial relationship with them out of fear for life. On that evening, three days before Christmas the women had returned home after a day's work in the fields and were sitting by the hearths cooking their evening meal. Malati, a

twenty-five old woman whose husband was shot at by the militants, summed up the incident for me,

We were very familiar with the presence of the NDFB (S). That evening they entered our huts and asked *baido aji ki bonai ase?* (Sister, what is for dinner tonight?). Just as I started responding to them, I heard gunshots outside and the militants inside my hut also ran out and started firing indiscriminately. We ran into the forest for safety, but almost twelve people, including women and children were killed from my village.

Standing close to Malati was Babulal, a forty years old man who worked as a daily wage labourer in a neighboring Bodo village. He was home early on that evening to prepare for the Christmas celebrations. He lifted his shirt and exposed his abdomen to show me the bullet marks and stitches which were still healing. He had sutures along the thumb on his right hand. He recounted, "*baido ami jongol, dhaan kheter maaje di polai golu, ekdum andher aaru gute gaat jok dhorise*" (sister we ran through forests and paddy fields for hours in the dark with leeches sticking to our bodies).

As already stated, I used an ethnographic method comprising of mostly narratives of lived experiences and participant observation. Narrative methods have a long tradition within a range of scholarly fields; including anthropology reflecting varied theoretical paradigms and research interests over the years (Eastmond 2007). Narratives are attractive for what they can reveal about how people themselves, as experiencing subjects make sense of violence and turbulent transformations. More specifically, these relate to understanding of other people's experiences and how best they and their experiences can be represented to do them justice. Analytically, there emerges the need to differentiate between life as lived, life as experienced and life as told. Lived experiences demand to be understood based on how the person perceives and prescribes meanings drawing on previous experience and cultural repertoires; the aspect of told has to be looked at with how experience is framed and articulated in a particular context (Eastmond 2007, Bruner 1986).

I must mention that my intention here is not to give violence a prurient form. The nature of the setting of the two sites and the narratives that emerged through repeated interactions with my interlocutors were of a shocking nature, nonetheless pertinence of analysis, especially in terms of their everyday lived experiences.

A comparison of the cases highlights how bodies open up to the world and those around them. In case of displaced people in the wake of immediate violence in camps the everyday is more extraordinary due to the immediate uprooting. Whereas those that have returned to their village and recount narratives two years after the last episode of violence, continue to struggle to come to grip with the past. By understanding the lived experiences of those directly affected by violence in two different temporal sites which are just sixty miles apart, I strive to unpack how exposure to repeated cycles of violence influences temporalities i.e. experiences of past versus the present, the cycle of temporal regularities and irregularities as well as the ordinary and the extraordinary. Given that the

residents of Misalmari were also affected by violence in 1996 and the internally displaced persons at the relief camp were affected in 1998, proves that they have been engulfed in cyclic episodes of violence and often while recounting their experiences, as I shall show below, they amalgam one episode with the other.

7.3 Situating the Study Within the Existing Discourse around Anthropology of Conflict

Before, moving on to the more empirical section, I would like to locate this article within the larger discourse of anthropological phenomenology and conflict by also focusing on the work on embodiment. The anthropology of conflict and violence is a fast-growing field of study, where critical ethnographers like Sverker Finnstrom have used phenomenological and reflexive approaches to minutely detail the everyday lived realities and experiences of those living amidst violence in Northern Uganda, and has reflected on how people engage with their local surroundings in search of balance, control and meaning, (Finnstrom 2008). This resonates with Michael Jackson's idea of balance, control as well as lack of control that should be woven into analysis of suffering, loss and vulnerability (Jackson 1998). Valentine Daniel's anthropography of violence in the context of civil war in Sri Lanka revolves around an extended peripatetic inquiry into the effects of violence on victims both in the short term which he describes as "the experience of the passion and the pain of violence in its brutal immediacy" and in the longer run outlined as "complex agendas and already begun mediations such as demands for justice, revenge, forgiveness, freedom, and relief" (Daniel 1996:4-6). Therefore, it becomes apparent that at the core of phenomenology, "the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms — to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself" (Bentz and Shapiro 1998: 96), thereby also allowing for the essence to surface (Cameron, Schaffer and Hyeon-Ae 2001). According to Wolputte (2004), in social and cultural anthropology, "the body was never completely absent, even if only for the fact that, implicitly, the bodiliness of the Other served as a principal marker of his or her Otherness". The body can be further distinguished at an individual and a social level. The individual body as already mentioned, emerges as the domain of phenomenological analysis through its focus on the lived or embodied experiences people have of their bodies. The social body, in contrast, refers to the ways the body (including its products like blood, milk, sperm etc.) functions as a natural symbol and a tool to think and represent social relationships like kinship, gender and mode of production (Featherstone et al. 1991).

Therefore, the anthropology of the body has transcended from its focus on the "abstract or ideal(ised) body", and instead shifted to those moments during which the body and bodiliness are

questioned and lose their self-evidence based on the experience or “threat of finiteness, limitation, transience, and vulnerability”. These embodied ambiguities confront the autonomy of the individual in a sense that they no longer appear “as a lack or deficiency, but instead as an existential characteristic of the human condition and as an ethical challenge” (Wolputte 2004). Moreover, while responding to William James’s (1996) call for a “radical empiricism,” anthropologists have worked to introduce more fully the historical, the cultural, the variable, and the relative into phenomenology, using methods of radical ethnography with a focus on experiences. Phenomenologists argue that at the root, even one’s very basic experiences of physical objects both envisage and entails a foundational intersubjectivity. Indeed, phenomenological anthropologists have frequently relied on the concept of experience as a way to orient their research generatively to the “complexly temporal, at times ambiguous, and deeply ambivalent realities of human existence” (Desjarlais and Throop 2011). It is in keeping in line with the existing approaches within anthropological phenomenology, that I use this approach in a situation of intense conflict and suffering and reflect on how the focus on the immediate is usually guided by the past and in anticipation of the future. As Vigh further notes that the focus should be geared towards the way people cope, not through crisis but in crisis, and in so doing provide valuable insight into an important but, as yet, largely implicit anthropological enquiry (Vigh 2008). Moreover, my attempt at reconstituting the normal or the ordinary does not mean that life in the relief camp or in the village is somehow what it was before the conflict (cf Greenberg 2011:89). As I shall go on to show that however compromised, makeshift and uncertain, everyday life continues to have some form of stability and predictability and over time the things people encounter during the day are familiar and make sense (transition from camp to village) and they are almost forced to chalk out ways in which to organise their present lives and attempt at planning for the future.

7.4 Analysing Comparative Lived Experiences of Conflict across Two Sites of Narratives

7.4.1 The Case of the Relief Camp

It deserves mention that my analyses contains not only dramatic but also repulsive ethnographic field material, including images and narratives of deeply dehumanizing violence. I shall now make an attempt to analyze the narratives that shift and altercate within the realms of past, present and future of my interlocutors within these two cases. These narratives provide a window into the impact of this conflict on the daily lives of individuals, families and communities, the reflective ways in which they make meaning of these experiences, and the activities they occupy themselves with to maintain a sense of agency. A comparison of these narratives across the two cases, as was

also unearthed by Finnstrom (2008) in his work on northern Uganda, shows that social memories created by these reflexive accounts are flux. They morph and alter along with lived realities and temporalities as a mechanism of adaptation, comprehension, and balance.

I believe that the two cases I present adds an additional layer to this by providing comparisons of how within a span of two years people's bodies transcend from finding themselves ruined, mutilated and uprooted to rebuilding and healing, notwithstanding in relation to time, space and everyday sites, albeit the fact that human beings ubiquitously actively participate, though not always equally, in the making of a future whether that future appears to repeat the past or not (Jackson 2005). The past remains more pronounced in the relief camp, while the present is still sinking in and the future doesn't hold much significance. In the village the immediate past often is mixed up with the more distant past and the future appears to be more prominent then the present. As I shall show, the violence is a break in their life worlds, but the external world continues.

The residents of the relief camp also lost their young children to the conflict. Bimala narrated, "as I was running into the forest I saw my neighbor also run with her three month old child, till a bullet pierced through her breast, she collapsed, as she held the baby close to her heart". I was later told that that the child was saved by another neighbor and is now being raised by his father. Among those who lost their young children was Jagori. When I first met Jagori, she was dressed in a long loose gown, locally known as a *nightie* and her two year old toddler trailed behind. She slowly began to recount the events of that evening,

I had gone to fetch water from the village well to cook the evening meal. A few NDFB militants had come to my house with a chicken and wanted me to cook it for them. My husband and two sons, aged two and four were at home chatting with the NDFB. As I was getting water and chatting about the day with the other women, we heard gunshots and it grew louder. I ran towards my hut and found that both my sons had sustained bullet injuries. My husband and I picked them up and ran to take shelter deep inside the forest, on the heels of other neighbors. My elder son bled profusely throughout the night. We tore up the clothes we were wearing to cover his wounds along with wild medicinal leaves. We all crouched together, shivering in fear. The army finally came in after what seemed like several hours and we took our son to the hospital, but he could not be saved.

She narrated all of this without shedding a tear and with a straight face. She then lifted the toddler's shirt and showed me the multiple bullet injuries he had sustained, while constantly tugging at the suture that gouged into the bullet wound on his arms. Satya, a forty-year-old man also related his story of narrow escape on that evening.

I was returning home after working in the field with two of my friends, on our bi-cycles. We did not hear about the attack that was taking place in the village. Suddenly we heard gunshots and a few men with locally made guns came chasing. We left our cycles and fled for our lives. I hid on the side of a stream and heard a loud scream. One of my friends had been shot. I ran like a mad man and thought this was the end for me. I ran for a while and thought that my other friend was behind me, but after running for a while I hid behind a tree and saw that my friend was being hacked with a sickle. I started running again, and finally came across a side road through which I escaped.

Both Jagori and Malati's narratives point to the fact that the coming of the NDFB(S) men to their villages, cooking meals for them and perhaps even sharing a meal was nothing out of the ordinary. Their bodies had oriented to this activity and therefore even on that uneventful evening, they could not foresee the attack coming. This notion of how bodies relate to familiar events leads me to Amit Baisya's expansion of Jean Amery's notion of codified abstraction. Baisya states that everyday reality is a dense network of "codified abstraction that orients my body towards objects in a certain way." He explains this as "the image of me buying a newspaper orients my daily action of going to buy a newspaper. This act seems habitual and familiar because this orientation towards the object closes the gap between the imagination and the event. A familiar world comes into being through a repetition of this act" (Baisya 2018:29). This connects with what Sarah Ahmed writes, "Familiarity is what is, as it were given, and which in being given gives the body the capacity to be oriented in this way or that. The question of orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we find our way but how we come to feel at home (Ahmed 2006:7).

The encounter with a world-shattering event, like the sudden attack by those familiar acquaintances strips away the protective casing that comes with our body being at ease with the familiar world around. The body then begins to relate to everyday objects through the tragic incident. To illustrate this, paddy fields and leeches remain etched onto Babulal's body as objects intrinsically connected to the violence, since Babulal and his friends ran for hours through the paddy fields. In my subsequent visits, Babulal would often speak about that night and how he had developed both an aversion and fear towards leeches, which otherwise are an everyday object in the reserved forests. Sleep had evaded him and others in the camp and they claimed to be in a constant state of alertness. Conversations always spiraled into that evening and their present state of helplessness. On one of my visits to the camp, I went for a walk with Bimala to her village, which had been torched in the conflict. She took me to show the remains of her house where she lived with her mother, father and two brothers. On the way to her house, she gestured towards a well and said, "look there...this is where they dumped the dead bodies of two elderly people in the village. They first shot them, then tied them with ropes and threw them into the well. The police found their bodies three days

later.” She then pointed at a few cows and goats that were grazing in the field nearby and said, “We had three cows and two goats. But we lost them to the conflict”. Her body (re) orients to everyday objects both living and non-living and sites through her lived experience of terror.

(Kirmayer 1992, 333) shows, metaphors are extrarational and are tools not only to think, but also especially to work with experience. Metamorphosing how the body makes such negative associations, my interpretation of Babulal’s account of leeches is that this haptic can be a mode of interspecies connection to describe the general feeling of disgust that is elicited by the touch of sticky substances on the skin. A part of that comes from an assumed viscosity and shapelessness associated with insectile forms; insects after all are other because of their general associations with stickiness, death and decay. Plus, the leech is horrifying since it obliterates boundaries between inside and outside- sticking to the skin, it bores within. The body (re) oriented to everyday objects, like the well, the bushes, the trees, the river, where memories of conflict was etched onto the bodies and surfaced in the everyday narratives, “See that well, they tied two men from our village and plunged them into the well”. Or “see those bushes, we hid inside them when the militants raged our village”. Or “see that river, we swam through it, often underwater to go to the other side into safety. Unfortunately the children couldn’t make it”. The conflict passes, but these everyday objects in the outside world remain to reverberate incidents bygone.

The untimely rains, only added to their misery, as the tarpaulin tents barely offered any protection when it rained heavily, and it often did rain heavily given the location of the camp within the reserved forest on the foot hills of Bhutan. It was as if the everyday life had come to a standstill, since they were too scared to venture far out into the forest or even go and check on their burnt homes. The men sometimes took day trips to the nearby town of Kokrajhar to enquire about the compensation money, which they had still not received. They lived to survive, one day at a time. Temporally this is where the present loomed large leading to the emaciation or bloating of memories and hope. Bodies move within nested identities: the household, the fields, the village all define the individual”. Conflict upturns and throws people out of these nests, and survival becomes essential.

I soon became a familiar presence in the life worlds of the residents. This was also around the time when monsoon was well on its way with regular thunderstorms and most families had received at least a part of the compensation from the government along with some utensils for everyday use and mosquito nets. But this was due to the elections to the Bodo Territorial Council that took place in April 2015, and the local leaders capitalized on the conflict situation as a strategy to garner votes. Spending more time with the residents soon revealed how everyday conversations alternated between what was to be cooked for dinner, if the ration would arrive on time, future of the children, illness, gossips about Jonaki, a young mother of two, who according to Bimala and her friends, “is usually drunk and flirts with the BSF guards”; to counter insurgency operations taking place

inside the forest, abductions, raids by the army, sighting of NDFB(S) cadres in the local market and violence. The urge of going back to their own villages, reconstructing their homes and buying new cattle was often overshadowed by feelings of fear and uncertainty. The general sentiment seemed to echo, “at least we are all together here, and what if they attack us again when we go back, and this is too soon”. In the recent days, they had started going to their villages during the day. The farthest village was at most one mile away from the relief camp. They took this time to clear and ruffle through the charred remains, pull out the weeds and nettles from taking over their lands, feed any remaining cattle or those that strayed back, but way before nightfall they made way to the safety of the relief camp. Once the ration did not arrive for ten days and the residents were forced to go seeking for work in nearby Bodo villages. Their bodies often trembled and shivered with fear when they made their way outside the comforts of the camp and their own villages, but as they recounted, “*upai naai*” (there is no other way). The body adapts and (re) orients but only when it becomes a necessity, as the wound was still fresh and not healed. It was only after six months, the monsoons forced them to re-orient their steps towards their villages. Recurring exposure to terror has the affect of incapacitation; it can render people immobile on the face of anticipatory danger. Mobility became extremely restrained and people rarely ventured into the forest out of fear. When I spoke about why they were so hesitant about leaving the camp, I was told “*‘baido ei NDFB keta etia o aahi thake. Aami hodai heo tok bozaar ot dekhi pau’* (the NDFB rebels continue to come to this village and roam around. We often see them in the market). This surprised me since the camp was heavily guarded with the presence of the Army as well as paramilitary. I had the most obvious counter question, ‘Are you sure?’ to which the response was, ‘*ami xiator mukh cini pau. Etia xihot civil dress ot ahe. BSF nejei ph(f)oreigher hoi. Xiot keneke gom pabo. Ami kio kobo zaam, amak bhoi laage. Aku amak attack koribo’* (we know these insurgents by face. These days they come dressed as ordinary people and added, “what does the Army know. They are foreigners” I am not in a position to confirm the presence of NDFB(S) cadres around the relief camp, but what this reflects is how terror creates a general aura of distrust and insecurity. The body is guided by the notions of familiarity, intimacy and habit. The case of the relief camp shows how people circumvent through the everyday at the immediate aftermath of a world-shattering event, in their life world.

7.4.2 The Village of Misalmaari

I now to move to the narratives gathered from Misalmaari, where the memory of the conflict had become slightly stale, yet was part of the everyday vocabulary. After almost two years since the violence, people had rebuilt their houses and were also in the process of going back to work. As the village headman recounted, “men and women from our village have started going to Bodo peoples houses and fields for work. We are scared of them and we hate them, but we need money and that is

why we go. Not everyone in this village has their own land or cattle. Since we are surrounded by Bodo villages, we have to go there to find work”. Unlike, the relief camp, here the villagers spoke about the past when they used to be friends with their Bodo neighbors, before 2012.

Fatima was a thirty years old woman who lost her husband in the conflict of 2012. She has three children aged three, six and nine. Fatima recounted her story,

My husband had gone to visit a neighbor and we thought he would join us but even after we moved to the relief camp there was no trace of him. I have been going to police stations and morgues and looked for him in every corpse they showed me, while also hoping for him to return. But now I have come to accept that he is dead. I cannot continue to mourn with three little children to feed and not a roof over my head. I have started collecting firewood and selling it in the market, after all but how long can one mourn.

She continued, “although I go to the local market and sometimes even sit next to Bodo women, I make sure to come back to my village before it gets dark. We do not speak to our Bodo neighbors unless they speak to us. But if they speak to us, we have to respond, right?” One day when I went to Fatima’s house with some medicines for her daughter who had a bout of flu, I happened to meet her brother, Abdul, who had moved to the nearby town of Kokrajhar after the conflict and worked as an apprentice to a mechanic in a garage. Abdul said to me, “these Bodos killed us and now they will also all die. Allah will see to it and give us justice”. The village headman who had also been affected by the conflict in 1998, once said to me, “they all came with black handkerchiefs wrapped around their faces...”, his son who was sitting nearby immediately interrupted, “father, you are again mixing this up with 1998. This time their faces were not covered”. This was not just a one off incident. On another day, the headman said to me, “did you notice those embankments by the river on your way to the village. After the conflict we often saw hands and finger of those killed or shot sticking out of the ground”. This time, Fatima who was nearby said, “oh that was way back in late nineties, during the Bodoland movement. He is getting old and always muddles up details of the numerous conflicts”. Usually, for a story to count as memory it must have a sense of pastness about it, but repeated violence distorts the sense of time rendering it difficult to approximate when the past flows into the present. Ewa Domńska (2005: 405) has termed this the “non-absent past,” which she describes as a “past, which is somehow still present, which will not go away or, rather, which we cannot rid ourselves of”.

This becomes particularly true when the body is exposed to repetitive cycles of violence in one lifetime. A widow named Jahan ran the tea-stall where I usually sat. I usually indulged in more than one cup of the sugary syrup. However, one day I refused my cup of tea as I was in a hurry since I had another appointment and it upset Jahan. When I promised her that I would be back soon to have

that cup of tea, she said, “what if me and my tea stall is not here anymore. What if they kill me and burn my stall?” Another time, Jahan recounted, “*baido raati judi kiba hobdo xuna pao, aru ekjon douri polai, aami sobe polau*” (sister, if at night we hear a sound, any sound, and we see someone from our village running, we all follow suit and run with him). This is how experiences from the past feed its tentacles into the everyday, and the body reacts as if it were in a state of emergency within the ordinary. The anticipation of the future emerges in discrete, bound temporal segments. The possibility of death is momentarily stalled before the cycle repeats itself, as has in the past.

These narratives show how the body has moved beyond the immediate present and had reached a stage of endurance rather than mere survival. This is similar in ways to Judith Pettigrew’s work on the civil war in Nepal, where she found that in landscapes marred by violence and strife, keeping the everyday chores going helped eased anxiety. People are usually hyper vigilant and try to pay enhanced attention to daily activities as they try to evaluate the degree of risk. It is like how the body returns home before dark, or only takes certain routes to the market avoiding others. How the river that flows by the village continued to remind them of swimming through it to save their lives, or the school that stands as a site of carnage, which they refuse to repair. Despite all the physical and mental sufferings, they continue to persist and this can be referred to as endurance. The catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime form of violence, still fresh in the relief camp, is usually followed by the uneventful less visible forms of structural violence- the ordinary chronic and cruddy, as visible in Misalmaari.

Contrary to the relief camp, in Misalmari, people had started going to the market and even to Bodo households, seeking work. Labour which of course is a very bodily activity, assumes prominence as it was imperative to use one’s body by engaging in manual work to earn money which was necessary to sustain the bodies, overruling fear.

They also spoke about revenge or how “we should have also burned their houses”. Misalmari was surrounded by Bodo villages and even after returning from the camps for a while they just remained in the village and did not take the main road, which led to the Bodo villages. Since, Misalmari only had a primary school, many children had to travel to Kokrajhar to attend high school. But since travelling to Kokrajhar would mean going through the Bodo villages, the children were not sent to school. What upset Jahan most was,

before 2012 we were friendly neighbors, we never harmed them, then why would they hurt us? Each time we walk past their village, we see our cows, our chicken, our television sets and mobile phones. Yet when they greet me, I smile back. This makes me so angry...makes me want to break their heads.

The villagers have to put on masks of affability to sail through everyday social situations. Jahan had to struggle to retain control over her body in order to maintain cordial relationship with her Bodo

neighbors. Although the past contains the germ of antipathy, defensiveness, and violence, it also contains the possibilities of trust, openness, and reconciliation (Jackson 2005). It is for those in the present to decide which options would be preferred and how the past will be interpreted. Fatima's narrative revealed hope even in distress. Through her reflections, Fatima realized she needed to focus on her present for her children who needed her and actively discover meanings and purpose in her present life. Unlike in the camp where the everyday was still trapped within the extraordinary, in Misalmari, a return to everyday activities gave existence some stability, and clarity.

7.5 Emergence of two Tropes — Endurance and Survival

The narratives lead me to identify two central but analytically distinguishable troupes through which the bodies practice agency, survival and endurance within the domain of the quotidian. The distinction between the concepts is one of temporality. Elizabeth Povinelli describes endurance as a mode of being that “encloses itself around the durative – the temporality of continuance, a denotation of continuous action without any reference to its beginning or end...” Internal to this concept, she adds, is its sense of “strength, hardiness, callousness; its continuity through space; its ability to suffer and yet persist” (Povinelli 2008:32). This form of endurance can be explained using what Ghassan Hage calls the state of stuckedness. He argues that the “social and historical conditions of permanent crisis we live in have led to a proliferation and intensification of this sense of stuckedness”. He further adds that this mode of confronting the crisis by a “celebration of one's capacity to stick it out rather than calling for change, contains a specific experience of waiting that is referred waiting it out” (Hage 2009), even though the crisis appears to be never ending as in the case of the villagers on Misalmaari. The temporal horizon here is that of the constant present, relentlessly affected by the past. The temporal horizon of survival, however, is that of the deferred-yet-possible future (Baisya 2018). While being stuck in the present, modes of excessive life and escape flit intermittently and can expose lines of flight from emergency like situations in the relief camp. Survival through crisis gestures to an excess, to that which escapes sequestration and lives on.

I must however admit that the distinction is more conceptual rather than empirical. Since the concepts are invariably more fluid in the everyday life worlds of both the residents of the relief camp and Misalmaari. As Das found in her work with those affected by the 1984 anti Sikh riots in India that it is not only violence experienced on one's body in these cases but also the sense that one's access to context is lost that constitutes a sense of being violated (Das 2007:8-9). Similarly, for Jagori, the village headman and Jahaan, among others the fragility of the social became embedded in a temporality of constant anticipation since they stopped to trust that context is in place. This leads to the production of fear that is real but not necessarily actualized in events, and comes to

constitute the ecology of fear in everyday life (Das 2007:11).

7.6 In Conclusion

I have tried to illustrate using a phenomenological approach, the lived experiences of conflict across the two cases and how they vary in their temporal aspects. I have tried to add to the existing body of work on the anthropology of conflict by using two case studies to show how bodies move from point (a) that of living in a relief camp to point (b), the village while constantly remaining vigilant, engaging in everyday chores, rebuilding their homes and (re) orienting their everyday spaces and sites of familiarity, intimacy and habits. Yet another analytical distinction I emphasized on across the two cases is that of survival and endurance. With narratives, I have unpacked the notion of how the conflict affects the body and ruptures the life worlds of people yet the external world continues to operate. By ushering in the added analytical layer of elections, I have strived to understand how the external world not only continues to operate but also expects from the individual to function in a certain way. Daniel (1996) writes in the context of Sri Lankan civil war, that an analytic ambiguity in ethnographies of conflict is that “experiences of conflict in the camps, other rural areas, and towns – which differed substantively – tend to be conflated”. I have strived to overcome this ambiguity by using the two cases, which are spatially and temporally different from each other. Therefore, what has emerged as a process is a comparative shared repertoire of expressing emotions and shared views on the lived environment of violence since the narratives are woven into patterns related to temporality, space and sites. Given that anthropology is increasingly focusing on conflict, violence, suffering, oppression and marginalization, there exists an impending scope to thoroughly realize and reflect upon the deeper effect that consistent volatility and uncertainty have on both our interlocutors and the conceptual apparatus we employ to comprehend their lives, especially in the context of South Asia. Finally, this is not just remain an academic exercise, but as Das states, that anthropology is obliged to remain “tireless, awake, when others have fallen asleep”(Das 2006 : 79).

7.7 References

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8 Conclusion — Carrying on in the Charred Forests

Remembrance

This summer it rains more than ever.
The footfall of soldiers is drowned and scattered.
In the hidden exchange of news we hear
that weapons are multiplying in the forest.

The jungle is a big eater,
hiding terror in the carnivorous green.

Mamang Dai¹

In this final chapter, I aim to bring together and expand on the arguments presented in the different articles included in this PhD thesis to transcend the more narrow geographic and thematic focus. I will try to strike a chord with a broader research agenda on political ecology of extraction, illegal forms of rural encroachment and conservation by armed forces in a wider context of societies afflicted by recurring conflict and violence. Notwithstanding the fact that in this collection of articles, each chapter in its own right has engaged with a particular conceptual debate and/or showcased an aspect of the interrelation between processes of extraction, informal encroachment, violent conflict, diffusion of power relations and authority structures among multiple state and non-state actors at different scales; some general conclusions can be arrived at from this compiled set of work. In the respective articles I have attempted to historicize and contextualize certain political ecological elements conspicuous within the RF in particular and the complex political milieu of Assam, in general. This concluding chapter consequently provides me with the scope to reflect upon the multi dimensional aspects of the debates presented, the strands of thought these have generated, and the potential room for future research in this sphere.

¹ Mamang Dai is a poet from the Northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. She writes in English.

Before formulating the concluding remarks, it is useful to restate the three key research question(s) that I outlined in the introductory chapter of this PhD, which ameliorated the discussion around the multi-scalar politics of violent conflict, extraction, encroachment and conservation in and around the RF in BTAD.

- How has the Reserved Forest in Assam (particularly in BTAD) emerged as lived geographies of violent inter-ethnic conflict, cooperation and competition?
- How these complex web of inter-ethnic relationships among the three major ethnic groups (as explained in the first article) and actors further operate in the (il)legal extractive economy and within forms of encroachment(s) and/or dokhol?
- How conflict and forms of domination, feed into (or not) the conservation- counterinsurgency nexus, eventually encompassing therein the notions of everyday?

In line with this, the thesis has been divided into three parts. In this concluding chapter I shall first highlight the overall implication and contribution this thesis makes to a larger social science debate that goes beyond the individual chapters. Thereafter, drawing on this, I shall group the concluding remarks into three leading scholarly and socio-political debates each closely intertwined with the research framework outlined in the introduction, in order to reinforce and partially expand these discussions.

As already mentioned in course of this thesis, the outbreak of large-scale violence that spread throughout the Brahmaputra valley in both lower and upper Assam from the late 1970s posed a challenge to conservation of forest and endangered species in protected areas and nature preserves, which in response has been militarized over time. This environment of frayed socio-political and economic relations among the forest (protected areas) and conservation bureaucracy as well as local residents, and administration, that is, the state, non-state, armed and non-armed actors had been the norm for over three decades by the time this research project was undertaken. This dissertation enriches and expands on the wider literature on the political ecology of forestry and land management by empirically and theoretically examining the state of violent (internal) displacement and contestation of rival land claims. One of the major contributions the dissertation makes investigating and explicating how practices like forest management and nature conservation are introduced into fragile conflict afflicted areas and are followed through apace with counter-insurgency operations, elections, temporary rehabilitation and other similar measures to restore rule of law and environmental and ecological safeguards. It further touches upon the literature on borderlands, given the geographical location of the research site to show the ways in which such remote and troubled areas experience and struggle with assertions of sovereign state power in the everyday. The dissertation analyses the

intersection between ethnic conflict and processes of environmental (conservation) politics within the framework of how ‘everyday’ lives of local populations unfurl within conditions (pertaining to events like episodes of elections, evictions, recurring conflict, access to forest, among others) that eventually normalizes an unevenly enforced regime and recognizes violence as a ubiquitous mode of interaction for political negotiations.

The first remark relates to the discussion on political ecology of extraction and encroachment in an area of conflict as discussed in the second and third article. In this chapter, I strive to transcend the narrow geographical and thematic focus, by additionally looking into debates on public authority structures and their operations in the wider political economy of lootable resources literature, among others. The second debate draws from and relates to the notion of conservation on war footing by national armed forces in actual areas of conflict, which I examine in the fourth article. I take this forward by delving into the additional debates surrounding civil-military relationships in areas of conservation to further enhance the linkages between conservation, counter-insurgency and armed forces. The third and final point of the conclusion carries forward the notion of everyday and the ordinary, which I dealt with in some detail in the introduction as well as the fifth article in the thesis. This discussion further assumes significance in order to exhibit a critique and way out of the chokehold of sovereign power and/or the prevalence of exceptionalism theses in northeast Indian studies. Additionally, I will conclude this chapter with recommendations for various avenues for future research.

8.1 “This (forest)land is mine” — RF as Site(s) of Extraction, Encroachment and Informalities

In the second article I have discussed the complex web of social and political inter-ethnic interactions and networks that are embedded within the illegal timber economy along with the modus operandi of grass roots social and political actors. I ought to reemphasize that this (il)legal economy has emerged as one of the major sources of livelihood and income generation for populations within and around the RFs, especially in context of enduring conflict, in a region with zilch industrial infrastructure coupled with severe paucity of urban job opportunities. However, in the second article our conceptual and empirical focus rested on unraveling the diffused and unequal authority structures associated with the timber commodity chain—akin to what Richard Snyder has called the ‘institutions of extraction’ (2006)—thus making illegal timber extraction possible. We further argued that the spatial logic of the timber extraction chain itself allows different forms of authority to claim differentiated access to rents. Through this article, I furthermore empirically connect the political ecology of extraction literature and critical conflict studies (the main emergent themes in

this thesis) through the outbreak of frequent ethnically inspired violence in the BTAD and show how this violence plays a role in transition or transformation of the informal political economy as well as the roles, the different state and non-state actors play, who are embedded in this economy.

Conversely, this discussion within the context of BTAD, could additionally benefit from a political economy of extraction and accumulation framework (see Snyder 2006; Ross 1999) which Snyder (2006) applies in the context of the illegal opium economy in Afghanistan and argues against the erudite binary inclination to assume that those involved in poppy farming or the opium trade are either greedy entrepreneurs or profit-maximizing farmers. According to Snyder (2006) for the majority, involvement in the opium economy is motivated by coping or survival. This holds true also in the context of BTAD, where for the conflict-affected communities, access to this economy serves as a major source of livelihood. This also ties into the notion of everyday within a conflict context, where in these communities resort to engagement in different forms of economic activities to live through the crisis and support their families. As research has shown, war is less about the breakdown of political and economic relations than about their reordering and transformation (Keen 1998; Le Billon 2000; Duffield 2001).

Moreover, scholarly work on political ecological forms of resource extraction and violent conflict in the northeast in particular as well as mainland India still remains scarce (for an overview see Robbins et.al 2009; Lahiri-Dutt 2007; Suykens 2010; Padel et.al 2010; Witsoe 2016; Bhan 2018). Therefore, such fine-grained analysis in other sites and contexts (social and political) of resource extraction within India pertaining to sand-mining, illegal wildlife trade, coal-mining and (il)legal extraction of other minerals like bauxite and uranium can aid in unraveling the complexity of production in addition to distribution of such illicit goods to further move beyond the simplistic warlords and greedy profiteers type of discourse that often seems to drive thinking and policy on this issue. If scaled up to a broader and more global context, these forms of extraction reverberates with other cases (e.g. Coronil 1997; Jones 2001; Tsing 2000; Watts 1992; Yang 2000) which re-contextualizes the modes that the movements of the global polity are constituted within energies of creative-destruction at the peripheries; thereby contributing to and building on the wider work on resource extraction in the South Asian context.

In continuance with forms of extraction, illegalities and authority structures, in my third article, I expound on the emergence of RFs as sites of informal forms of encroachment by forest dwellers and/or encroachers akin to their counterparts in urban slums. The modes of encroachment in the remote rural forests are guided by forms of negotiations and only very selective (violent) contestations with the forest department, responsible for managing (read controlling) and conserving the forest. These processes have to be understood within the tacit context(s) of colonial forest making in India, which I speak about in some detail in the second, third and fourth articles. As Sivaramakrishnan

(1995) writes in order to understand the political moments of culture embedded in colonial forest practices, continued to be used by the modern state, that hegemonic processes are not self-securing. In fact, they are constructed, maintained, and modified by both human agents and state agencies through contest and cooperation on sites like India's forestlands. Therefore, mere laws and policing cannot take away from the forest dwellers their heartfelt ownership of the forest (including its resources), which was wielded through the two-fold practice of *dokhol* and resource extraction. The key concept that connects the notion and practices of *dokhol* and extraction within the RFs is the disaggregated state apparatus and fragmented public authority. Although in the first, second and third article I have touched upon the notions of the apathetic state in BTAD and dwindling forms of public authority, I believe by further elucidating the concept of state and public authority more broadly, I can open the dialogue between critical conflict studies and political ecology in fragile contexts.

As I discuss in my third article, *dokhol* is carried out in a step-by-step manner both by the forest dwellers and the state actors by navigating the interstices between legality and illegality. This is done by exploring the process of legalization over time, which involves unpacking the notion of the state through creation of permanent and semi-permanent institutions, which, over time, destabilize the state–legality binary and, in turn, the categorization of the encroached villages within the RF as an illegal space to be evicted at some point in time. Moreover, these dwellers and their activities and spaces occupied are not inherently legal or illegal, but rather 'legalised' or 'illegalised' within specific contexts of power and politics" (Thomas and Galemba 2013: 212). This has to be situated within the forest laws that have evolved over time. Yet, interestingly enough the discussions surrounding ambiguous treatment of customary rights between colonial administrators and Indian parliamentarians, separated by over a century, often reverberate (Sivaramakrishnan 1995).

Although, in principle India is a thriving democracy with institutions of (state) public authority like the forest department, armed forces, police and the district administration well in place. In spaces like the RFs state presence has always been limited as regulator of public life, rather the state is fully vested with COIN operations in these peripheral zones. Therefore, in spaces with multiple and overlapping state and non-state actors, like the RF, asserting claims over remote (forest)land and resources in a geography strewn with violent conflict, the centrality of state law turn out to be increasingly fragmented and internally pluralized (Santos 2002). The notion of the state as a single agent acting above society (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) are challenged to emphasize these very disaggregated notions of power divided between state and non-state individuals and institutions (Sharma and Gupta 2006). These forest dwellers (referred to as encroachers) oscillated between their allegiances to local rebel groups (out of fear) and the forest department, which in most cases either led to their evictions or attack by the rebels (in December 2014). The assiduous claims of the

encroachers through *dokhol* combined with ways to deal with and withstand (temporary) evictions and the ability to alter between political parties, brings the state and informality together in the forest crafting an interstitial space between legal and illegal. “This represents a becoming or creating of legal space.”²

In this ambiguous space characterized by processes of grey legality and insecure tenure, a symbiotic and symbolic relationship reigns between state and illegal practices and, especially, the varied actors inside and around states [that] maneuver actual legality and illegality in complex ways (Cooper 1998). While in the RF, often the notions of what is considered to be legal and/or illegal converge in the understanding of the dwellers and the authorities, yet the tension surfaces when the state administration using the notion of legality make a superficial attempt to oust the encroachers, who in turn refrain from demanding legal rights over the land and move deeper into the forest to escape the gaze of the state. This consistent lack of clarity in respect to state laws related to modes of informal practices and drawing of fuzzy boundaries within the RF, on the one hand enable flexible accommodation and on the other also gives infinite rights of eviction to state officials (see Hall, Hirsh and Li 2011). It is evident that boundaries within RF continue to be ambiguously assigned and is in a constant state of flux depending on relationships of contestation and negotiation between the encroachers and officials. Therefore, the process of *dokhol* consisting of “fuzzy zones of compromise, bribery and accommodation become the rule rather than exception” (ibid.: 16).

In fact exchange, dialogues and forms of negotiations continue to drive forest politics by the forest officials through discussions with those in the timber trade as well as forest encroachers. This is seen as an attempt to mediate between the state’s rigid task of forest conservation and the increasing agricultural needs on the ground. As, I mention in the third article, eviction was rarely considered an option mainly due to scant resources at the disposal of the forest department to both carry out eviction drives and also to follow up on it. The forest department does resort to it when new villages are established in virgin forestland even after repeated warnings, but this never has a very efficient way of governing the forest and lives of the forest dwellers.

Consequently, these notions of controlling and restricting human populations and settlements to save and conserve the environment connects to the rational on conflicts that characterize present-day **conservation**, where the need to protect endangered species comes into contact with the lives and rights of people who live in and around the increasingly threatened national parks and protected areas. This makes it imperative for a better and more comprehensive conception of such ambiguous spaces like political forests, beyond India and South Asia, that proliferates vulnerabilities and are at the most intense during events of conflict, elections and evictions, producing continuous forms of othering of the rural poor.

² C.f Massey 2005

The RFs have thus emerged as sites of conflict, extraction and conservation and in the fourth article I highlight how conservation is carried out by the ETF, a part of the Indian Army on war footing. An aspect that I touched upon in the fourth article but did not expound on is the notion of civil-military relationship, so in the next section I highlight the importance of this debate and situate it within the context of the ETF in BTAD.

8.2 “No Counter-Insurgency is not our mandate and we are not here to foster relations with local communities” — Conservation by Armed Forces in Zones of Conflict

Overall, the literature on the engagement of the military in environmental protection or ecological missions is still scarce; the role of armed forces in environmental security activities particularly in developing countries is not as well documented as is quite common in the Western democracies these days with dedicated websites and doctrinal references. Therefore, particularly essential for further research would be case studies on such military activities outside their traditional roles, especially in developing countries. What is of particular interest is conservation on war footing by armed personnel in actual war zones. Dovetailing the above, in the fourth article I draw from and develop on the political ecology literature on green militarization and violent environments (Peluso and Watts 2001) using the case of the ETF of the Indian Army and their role in conservation within the RF. I strove to address the intersection between important themes like conservation on war footing and crisis conservation in political ecology and debates about violence and conflict. I also showed how conservation practices are intertwined with local and conflict dynamics and how this ties into struggles over power and resistance. Moreover, my case also negates the conservation counter-insurgency (COIN) nexus to argue that in the case of the ETF and the prevailing conflict on ethnic lines within the RF, COIN prevails over conservation. Using a multi-scalar approach, I have discussed the various state and non-state actors embedded in this conservation-COIN operation and how they react to the specific challenges of conservation in ‘violent environments’ and also co-constitute each other.

Yet, another interesting aspect of conservation by armed forces has been the sparse literature on transformation of civil-military relationships through such practices. Using the case of Botswana’s defense forces, Anastasia Bugday (2016) analyses linkages between environmental degradation and civil-military relations (CMR) especially concentrating on how environmental protection missions increase civil–military cooperation, especially in developing countries. Within this general context, Rebecca Schiff argues that the military along with the political elites, and the citizenry should work towards cooperative relationship in strategic situations such as foreign policy, COIN, and

military strategy. Schiff's concordance theory highlights the "high level of integration between the military and other parts of society as one of several types of civil-military relationship" (1995: 7). Schiff subsequently introduces the concept of targeted partnership involving reciprocity between the military, the political elites, and the citizenry. This reciprocity is established for a limited time period in order to reach specific objectives. When it comes to environmental concerns, militaries from several countries like United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Sweden and Finland, Latvia are now also concerned with the long- and short-term effects of environmental problems on their soldiers stationed abroad, as well as the local population (Bugday 2016). In case of Botswana, the BDF's anti-poaching missions have been mostly successful, which is unexpected given the fact that at the commencement of military participation in environmental protection missions, there was no successful precedent that the BDF could have emulated or built its activities upon. This is particularly so since similar missions failed in the neighboring states of Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Undoubtedly, the foremost challenge for the BDF in forging relationship with the local population was to convince them that they would be able to protect them from the heavily armed gangs of poachers. BDF thus relied on, what Henk (2007: 105) calls, good publicity to boost its image, particularly its participation in anticrime patrols in cities that "reduced the level of violent crime". Of particular importance for the success of BDF's missions was establishing and maintaining close relationships with the local population that reside next to wildlife reserves, as in Maun, Kasane and Shakawe (Bugday 2016). Of course, unlike Botswana, not in every case does the military's involvement in conservation practices result in augmentation of CMR as has been shown by Elizabeth Lunstrum in the Kruger National Park (Lunstrum 2014) and Esther Marijnen in Virunga National Park in Congo (Marijnen 2018). However, as Lunstrum (2014) argues that the spatial characteristics of protected areas matter immensely for the convergence of conservation and militarization and I would add to this the aspect of CMR. Steering this discussion to analyze the role of the ETF in Assam within a conflict context, I found that they did not want to engage with the local populations unlike their battalions in other states of India. To illustrate this, I would like to highlight the ETF in the states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh where unlike in Assam, the main problems that the ETF is faced with include difficult terrains like mountainous and infertile wastelands, snow bound regions, logistical issues like limited or non existence of water, electricity, roads, extreme weather conditions like cloud burst, wind chill, wildlife and only rarely lack of support from the local stake holders. Most of the difficulties are related to logistics and local environmental factors. Therefore, the ETF is known to be working very closely in these states where local communities often join the ETF in plantation activities. In Assam, one of the major issues that the ETF faces is that of law and order. As I mentioned in detail in the fourth article, a few years back while the ETF was working in their plantation site they were ambushed by local militants and their weapons were

seized. I highlight these to foreground the importance of local spatial characteristics while taking into account aspects of CMR and that in the studies so far the literature has either highlighted the more negative outcomes of military engagement with environmental conservation through processes of green militarization or a more positive outcome as was seen in case of Botswana. My case however demonstrates that it does not always have to be one or the other and that conservation by national armed forces can take place independently of the involvement by local populations, depending on the wider geographical context. This further ties in to the conservation COIN debate to highlight that actors and objectives need not necessarily converge across cases.

So, far in the first, second, third and fourth articles I have provided a blueprint of the RF as a space encompassing within it the issues of violent conflict, extraction, conservation, encroachment and the numerous state and non-state actors who are embedded in these processes. This leads me to make the obvious transition and shift my gaze to the notions of everyday that operate within these conflict contexts. From focusing on the more meso-processes, in my fifth article I narrow down to the way communities most affected by violent conflict make sense and live through it, while engaging in the extractive economy and *dokhol* practices. This is to stress that the more exogenous political ecological processes of extraction, conservation and encroachment cannot be separated from ordains of everyday practices of rebuilding homes, negotiating with forest officers, burying the dead and caring for the ill. In fact these processes are largely entwined and complement each other. Therefore, drawing from all the other articles, I now specifically focus on the agency of the forest dwellers and those in BTAD whose lives are engulfed in the conflict.

8.3 Beyond the Woods — Conflict, Coping and the Everyday

When conflict broke out in December 2014 we temporarily moved to the relief camp. After staying in the relief camp for three months we returned to our village and found the charred remains of our house. We lost the paddy and mustard that was yet to be harvested. We now live in a small hut with walls made up of cloth and plastic sheets but have a tin roof that we received from an NGO. Our main struggles are around food, water and elephants.³

Yet another aspect of this PhD has dealt with the way local communities live through recurring conflict and make sense of it — at the immediate aftermath as well as with the passage of time. The idea has been to capture narratives to comprehend how the everyday is unmade in states of terror and how it is simultaneously remade as violence “descends into the ordinary” (Das 2006). I resort to the concepts like the everyday and the ordinary to highlight how they crosshatch with

³ Interview with a family in the relief camp in January 2015.

articulations of the strategic and tactical will to survive as was apparent from the empirical narratives and observations, I discuss in the fifth article. Nevertheless the incidents of recurring violence and retaliatory COIN operations in the BTAD have to be situated within the wider geography of violent conflict in northeast India. The region has been governed as an exception to the rule-of-law in India⁴. Although talk of conflict resolution continues to be very much in the air, emergency laws that deal with this ostensible disturbed area are still in place. The AFSPA, for instance, was extended in Assam for six months on February 28, 2018 (Baishya 2018). This over time has led to the production of a ubiquitous culture of militarism, which correspondingly spawns its spectral counter-image. Aretxaga (2012: 229) calls this a “phantomatic mode of production”—a configuration where state terror coupled with separatist violence “produce both the state and terrorism as fetishes of each other, constructing reality as an endless play of mirror images.” As I already argued in my introductory chapter, this tendency to conceptualize the northeast of India as a perpetual localization of the state of exception, especially when filtered through the Agambenian lens over the past two decades in northeast Indian studies is but a reductive approach. This tendency has resulted in deficient attention to the quotidian, the mundane and the ordinary, which seems to disappear in this exclusive focus on the realms of the symbolic and the spectacular choreographies of violence and death. This in fact impelled me to pay closer attention to the distinctly ordinary ways through which populations survive and endure states of dispossession and abandonment, which has been highlighted in the works of Veena Das (2006), Daniel (1996) and Sverker (2008); among others. More recently, within northeast Indian studies authors like Pachuau and Van Schendel in their book *The Camera as Witness*, in the context of Mizoram focus on ordinary dimensions of photography to illustrate “local agency in the creation of vibrant contemporary societies that have little to do with obsolete ethnographies as they have to do with the security gaze” (Pachuau and Van Schendel: 4). Others like Makiko Kimura in *The Nellie Massacre* has critically engaged with local memories of the 1983 massacre in Nellie in Assam through a focus on “ordinary people” and the “agency of the rioters” (Kimura 2013: 3). On similar lines, Duncan McDuie-Ra, a prominent contributor to the debate on exceptionalism in the region, notes in *Northeast Migrants* that “Academic and policy literature on the Northeast is still dominated by attempts to explain the causes of violence rather than analyzing the ways this violence is experienced, normalized, and contested” (McDuie-Ra 2013: 17). This stands in contrast to Veena Das’s views in *Life and Words*, where she notes that how our theoretical impulse “is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than as a descent into it” (Das 2006: 7). Conversely, for McDuie-Ra, the category of the everyday seems to be defined as a move away from the exceptionalism, rather than being situated within the exceptional. In this vein, his work centers

⁴ As already discussed, the Northeast has been framed using the concept of exceptionalism. See McDuie-Ra, “Fifty Year”; Karlsson, *Unruly Hills*; Vajpeyi; and Gaikwad for considerations of this notion exceptionality.

more on migration from the region into mainland India (either as a result of this exceptionalism or to flee this state of terror), as opposed to a focus on the minutiae of everyday life experienced by populations who continue to live amidst recurring violence and terror (Baishya 2018). Contiguously, where should we look for the ordinary? In response Veena Das writes:

...the notion of the ordinary takes us to an important characteristic of everyday life...its very ordinariness makes it difficult for us to see what is before our eyes...we need to imagine the shape that the ordinary takes...Depending on how we conjure the everyday, the threats to the everyday will also be seen in relation to this picture of the ordinary...if we see the ordinary as habitation within a world in which we dwell in a taken-for-granted way as an animal lives in its habitat, then the threat might be seen as our existence becoming ghostly (Hamlet), losing that natural sense of belonging...Framing all these pictures of the everyday is the idea that everyday is a site on which the life of the other is engaged (Das 2010: 71-72).

Drawing on Das, my focus has been on continuities and (re)orientations in the representations of everyday as manifested through modalities of dealing with abject loss of life and property, moving from life in village to temporary relief camps and not completely rebuilding the charred village home post conflict in anticipation of future violence. Besides, my objective has also been to move away from spectacular forms of bodily resistance, a case in point being the celebrated protest by Manipuri women who stripped in front of the Army headquarters in Imphal, holding a banner that read “Indian Army Rape Us”, in retribution to incidents of sexual assault and torture by the Army under the garb of AFSPA. I do not in anyway undermine such enormously courageous and powerful gesticulations, but it has to be kept in mind that these are not normative practices and hence arises the need to deliberate on quotidian, diffused, uneventful narrative manifestations of modes of survival and coping.

Coming back to the RF in the BTAD, this sustained emphasis on the uneventful as the locus of survival expressed in myriad forms as seen in spheres of livelihood practices, moving deeper into the forest, building of temporary settlements, enduring evictions and COIN operations, are all illustrations of engagement with the quotidian.

It is here that I would like to call for a closer and infinitesimal examination of the *political* in political ecology and *society* in nature-society relationships in conservation areas like the BTAD. Especially since such areas are typically identified as spaces where a wide array of different types of violence unfolds—physical, structural, symbolic, epistemic, slow, and green violence. Mirroring the wider field of political ecology, critical conservation studies have strongly focused on the discursive and political-economic dimensions of violence, often at the meso or macro level (Verweijen 2018).

In contrast, the micro-dynamics of direct physical violence, specifically ordained by state and non-state armed actors—have received less sustained attention. Drawing on conflict studies and sociology of violence, there is a need to address this relative neglect for the scholarship of conservation areas, in particular those immersed in violent conflict, along with a focus on the local communities who live in these areas and suffer the burnt of violent conflict. In hindsight, a recalibrated sense of the political and the social can potentially emerge both from attention to the aleatory and the capricious in the realm of everyday life and forms of being.

This PhD dissertation using a multi-scalar approach within a remote rural conflict setting indicates that this is an important question to ask, as to how “forests in post-colonial era” emerge simultaneously as geographies of conflict, competition, contestation and co-operation. This is an especially important area of inquiry for analysis in conflict-affected zones, encompassing the intertwining of several state and non-state actors embedded in unequal and evolving forms of power relations and authority structures. Indeed more research needs to be conducted in modes of extraction, crisis conservation and encroachment in protected areas and a subsequent descend into the ‘everyday’, in zones of recurring violent conflict.

8.4 Avenues for Further Research

Although this PhD has been presented as a collection of articles, several strands of thoughts recurred, some merely in passing, but are worth further exploration and deserve to be discussed. Moreover, this conclusion should not be regarded as a summary of the main empirical findings and concepts, amassed in rural Assam over the course of the past four years, but should be regarded as a nascent effort geared towards providing additional impetus to fascinating yet critical debates about violent conflict, emergence and sustenance of protected areas as sites of conflict, *modus operandi* of the local (il)legal timber commodity chain and phenomenology of lived experiences of conflict — situating the everyday within the spectacular. It is important that I highlight the issues and/or concepts I touched upon in this dissertation but did not get the opportunity to engage with in detail due to logistical constraints, personal inclinations and previous academic training, among others. Moreover, in the end it boiled down to taking a call as regard to the spatial, conceptual and theoretical focus of this dissertation, which requisitioned that certain themes, although important, be left out. In this concluding section I shall broadly focus on three agendas for future research through which more prolific discussions can surface at the intersection of political ecology, critical conflict studies and the notion of everyday. These pertain to — firstly the concept and the area of Borderland studies; secondly, post-colonial democracy and elections in violent contexts; and lastly, gender, and conflict.

8.5 “Every morning we go to work in the Bhutanese town of Gelephu, right across the border” — the India-Bhutan Borderlands

Throughout this PhD I recounted that the RF area where I carried out my research was on the Indo-Bhutan borderlands. I also mentioned that these forests are known as Kachari Doars and were used as trade routes to Bhutan in pre-colonial times by the Bodos. In recent times, this border is easy to navigate due to the friendship treaty between India and Bhutan, which allows visa free entry for Indian nationals into Bhutan. In fact, every morning one can see scored of people from bordering villages cycling into Bhutan. The town of Gelephu offers employment to around 24,000 Indian laborers of both sexes⁵. However, the border also acts as an easy escape route for the various active militant groups. The border faces closures from time to time owing to law and order issues. There was a brief closure in the aftermath of the Royal Bhutan Army’s Operation All Clear in December 2003 to flush out Indian insurgent camps.

In course of my fieldwork on the timber commodity chain, I was told that there are ample instances of timber being smuggled into Bhutanese territories. The corridor between India and Bhutan has also been infamous for frequent abductions by militant groups, attacks on passing cars for ransom (mostly in the night) and hiding camps for the militants.

As with most borderlands, this geo-political region is characterized by disparities in the levels of (in) stability, violence, the embeddedness of state institutions and market dynamics. Attempts to account for this unevenness have often embraced a ‘diffusionist narrative’ (Harvey 2006), in which borderland and frontier regions that continue to experience violence, poverty and illegal practices are often portrayed as residual or marginal spaces left behind by the uneven diffusion of capitalism and state-building (Cramer and Goodhand 2002). The antidote to this is the imposition of more effective state institutions, liberal peace policies and market practices in order to both develop and integrate these regions into national political structures and national and transnational economies (see Das and Poole 2004; Goodhand 2005). As Snyder (2006) notes, these borderlands are also places of constant flux as the geography of the conflict ebbs and flows and the policies of neighboring countries change. The permeability of borders varies over time, further affecting borderland practices. While the border exists to separate and control, it is also its very existence that gives rise to a whole range of shadow economic activities commonly found in the borderlands - the petty trade, tourism trade, shuttle trade, or the smuggling of (il)licit goods. In the remote borderlands of Asia not within the reach of the formal power of the central state, dynamics of the borders are governed not only by local governmental bureaucracy but also by various parties living their lives in the borderland areas, for example, individual border guards, the ethnic communities, the petty

⁵ See https://www.telegraphindia.com/1070102/asp/northeast/story_7206631.asp

smugglers or the more organized rackets.

Empirically speaking, unlike the comparatively well-studied borders of India—like those with Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, China and Myanmar—the Indo-Bhutan borderland is more understudied. Although there is a history of ethnic violence on the Indian side of the border (see Dutta 2016, Barbora 2015, Das 2013), it has not affected the everyday social and economic exchange across the border.⁶ Therefore, despite being a peripheral space, unlike other borderlands in the region, this is not a liminal space characterized by attacks, famines, the denial of dignity or the saga of partition. The border between Bhutan and India does not speak to issues of belonging, forced displacement and banality (see Cons 2009, 2013; Gellner 2012; Jackson 2006; Korf and Raeymakers 2013). In fact, the Ahom kingdom that ruled the region for centuries before the British, had shared friendly trade exchanges with Bhutan since the 1300s (Baran 2006). In Bogle and Manning's (1876) account, "The Bhutanese, the people of Lhasa, and those of several other countries located to the northwest of the Brahmaputra carried out uninterrupted trade with Assam." The British rule did not dampen these exchanges. Also interviews carried out with Bhutanese nationals in Gelephu often reiterated these connections. One of my interlocutors said: *"My grandfather used to come down to the border every summer and get rice, vegetables and eri silk in exchange for dry fish and wool. My grandfather also spoke fluent Assamese and his friends in Assam spoke Bhutanese"*.

On the diplomatic front, Bhutan and India share special bilateral relations in trade and development by virtue of the Indo-Bhutan friendship Treaty of 1949, which was updated in 2007 and called for the expansion of economic relations and cooperation in the fields of culture, education, science and technology, while also allowing more freedom to Bhutan in areas of foreign policy and military purchases.

In the course of my PhD fieldwork, I found that upon the face of prolong violence on the Indian side of the border, the Indo-Bhutan borderland has been a site of resilience to this precarity and surfaced as a zone of "salvage accumulation" (Tsing 2015) for other commodities besides timber, like riverbed alluvial soil and encompasses within it the labor and livelihoods of indigenous communities. Dovetailing the above, an important arena of future research could be to describe and understand how capitalistic values are attached to sand as it travels from the riverine upstream in Bhutan to its downstream India; since in this movement, capitalism is sustained on an everyday basis by a messy material base, which further acquires its shape as the ruins and remains of capitalist extraction somewhere else (e.g. the massive infrastructure construction underway in upstream Bhutan). Some pertinent questions to ask could be —How are the processes and practices of salvage accumulation configured in a conflicted borderland where political strongmen, militant overlords and migrant laborers all play their parts? What happens when a commodity, which is illegal on one side of the

⁶ Gathered through interviews with villagers, shopkeepers and forest officials on both sides of the border.

border and is lifted to the level of legality on the other side? How does this change the modus operandi of the trade, production networks, and the whole commodity chain? What does it mean for the indigenous populations embedded within the chain?

This could advance the debates on political ecology and economy of resource extraction and conflict in borderland areas.

8.6 “How does it matter who we vote for, our houses will be set on fire and our children will be killed, anyway” — Post-Colonial Democracy and Elections in Sensitive Spaces

I mentioned in my methodology chapter and in some of the articles that the fieldwork for this thesis coincided with Parliamentary elections in 2014, the BTC elections in 2015 and elections to the Assam Assembly in 2016. Therefore, I ended up spending a considerable amount of time in the local party offices, interviewing candidates, attending political rallies and campaigns, speaking to my interlocutors on their choice of candidates and parties and visiting polling booths. These interviews and observations led me to begin with the assumption that BTAD presents a case of a democracy that carries within it a complex intertwining of violence and a trajectory of fear. Yet, it also presents an aberration to the way democracy has been conceptualized, theorized, negotiated and understood in the larger Indian context. The more generic literature on democracy in India contains a vast array of work on patronage and clientelism (Berenschot 2012; Kohli 2001; Bjorkman 2015; Banerjee 2017; Chandra 2007), corruption, functioning of state institutions (Wade 1984, Gupta 2012). Or the work of Alpa Shah (2010: 36) with Mundas in Jharkhand where she notes that

given a choice, most Mundas preferred to have nothing to do with *sarkar* and expected nothing from it. They did not accept the idea that *sarkar* served the public good, seeing it instead as related to an exploitative kind of politics. Mundas associated all things *sarkari* with part of an ‘outside’ and ‘alien’ world.

Moreover, it has been observed that usually people vote away from the center of fear or vote for a certain party because they fear the advent of a certain other party (Bihar elections 2014 or elections in Western UP). However, in the case of BTAD, the social imagery of fear was widely prevalent and people voted for the party or rather the person they feared the most. Does this not present an anti-thesis to India’s democracy where we have made a departure from Scott (1969), and his depiction of electoral exchanges as machine-like and cast voters not as collective agents possessed with real bargaining powers but as manipulated and exploited subalterns, victimized by what de Wit (1996) calls the politics of illusion? and are in fact gearing towards a more progressive

democracy as seen in Lisa Bjorkman's (2015) case in Mumbai where voters give electoral support to candidates who demonstrate access to specialized knowledge and effective sociopolitical networks, exhibit both a willingness and capacity to act on voters stated preferences and can mobilize available resources- social, economic, political towards desired social results. The idea of a democracy itself gets complicated in a setting like BTAD where it is fear that reigns in between periods of violence.

In fact, I found that the timber economy and informal encroachment practices are embedded within processes of political accommodation and local clientelistic and patronage networks. These processes could well be framed using a post-colonial democratic theory that emerges from the growing awareness that democracy in most of the world is not functioning according to liberal assumptions and stresses the need to seriously explore alternative ways for understanding democracy in the twenty first century that goes beyond the liberal democratic framework (Witsoe 2013). However, this does not imply that most post colonial democracies are same or even regions within India are same; each is formed by the particular histories that predate colonialism, the individual dynamics of independence movements, and the contingencies of post-colonial political economy (Sivaramakrishnan and Agarwal 2003). This could be used as a starting point to examine the micro democratic processes (election campaigns, the complex embeddedness of the Indian state in society (Berenschot 2011) - within the BTAD, polling and everyday functioning of the district administration).

Therefore, a post colonial democracy framework could be applied to explain the complex web of social and political inter-ethnic interactions and networks that operate within the illegal timber economy and its connection with democratic processes by observing elections at multiple levels — national, state assembly and local council. This could further the debate by connecting political economy of conflict literature with studies on democracy and elections in South Asia (Berenschot 2013; Harris White 2003; Korf 2004, 2013; Eckert 2014; Witsoe 2013).

8.7 “Look! Look at that deaf and mute woman there....a few years ago she was picked up from her house and brutally raped by five paramilitary personnel” — Gendering Conflict

Narratives of sexual assault on women and minor girls by armed personnel and in relief camps reigned large in the geography of violence in BTAD. Scholars like Goswami 2014; Bora 2010; Kolas 2017 have worked on aspects of feminist politics, gender and security in northeast India. My visits to relief camps usually greeted me with a typical sight constituting of sick and crying infants in the arms of young, often under-aged mothers, young kids who no longer go to school (since the school has also been burnt down), several teenage girls (who are often very shy and usually have

to be persuaded to come out of their tents to talk to me, especially if I am accompanied by a male research assistant. The sight that strikes me the most are groups of teenage boys and young adults who just hang around, often as silent onlookers. It is a known fact that in most conflicts or political violence across the world the women and children are worse affected. However, most academic as well as policy research on civil wars or ethnic conflict have tended to focus on ‘men’ especially when it comes to recruitment practises of rebel groups, motivations for joining insurgency as well as rehabilitation programs for surrendered militants (for an overview see Eck 2010; Weinstein 2005; Hegghammer 2013; Buhaug et.al 2009; Walch 2018). Therefore, what I found fascinating as a line of inquiry is the role of women in rebel violence and their forms of participation in these groups, an area which has barely been explored (see Braithwaite and Ruiz 2018). Specifically in the context of the illegal timber economy yet another important field of inquiry would be the operationalization of masculinities within the commodity chain especially focusing on the amount of risk these young men are willing to take on and how that shapes the perception about their masculinities in the wider society. The former line of inquiry I perused further in a blog piece I wrote for the LSE South Asia Blog⁷ where I explored the role of women recruits in the NDFB(S). This was backed by empirical evidence from my fieldwork along with a photograph shared with me by a journalist friend, of a group of young women in military clothing and holding assault rifles. Looked like the women were on training in a camp. However, I have not examined the dynamics of masculinity within the timber commodity chain as it was beyond the scope of my research, but it could well be a potential avenue for future research.

Finally, this dissertation aims to provide readers new insights in the organization of the local, micro and the everyday in the ‘political margins’ in paces such as Assam, where perusal of research that focuses on issues of a sensitive nature continues to remain a challenge. This PhD research suggests that a focus on the concepts of rural informalities, crisis conservation, state and public authority more broadly, are rewarding entry points for the analysis of these ‘real-world’ intersections.

⁷<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/05/17/a-look-at-insurgency-and-women-recruits-of-assams-bodo-areas/>

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Fire In The Forest

They built their huts in the jungle
They built their houses in the forest
For whom did they clear the jungle
For whom did they build the huts
by the green fields...
murmured the silent rivulet
here, in the virgin forest
resounded with ancient melody
the flute of the cowherd
butterfly dreams once were there
when the lush vegetation
heard the baidemlai tune of the serja
there still was my dear little village
with jungles jiggling and jostling
with the dim light here and there
it was here that their dreams blossomed
as fragrant as the fresh bloom
the innocent laughter of children.
It was here that the beats of kham
beckoned the clouds...
the virgin fields leaped up to the tune of sifung
now they have built tall buildings
and built their capital here,
the fire they brought burns the jungle now
here, there and everywhere...
and push the virgin forest and lush vegetation
to an untimely death
there is fire, fire every where
fire in the virgin forest.
Fire in the lush vegetation.

Anil Boro, translated by the author.